

# MSC SPIRITUALITY OF THE HEART IN VIETNAM

## *A Liberating Mission*

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### *Synthesis*

My aim in this article is to explore the originality of the spirituality of the heart of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), its development from the charism of Father Jules Chevalier, its values from a biblical perspective, and its meaning according to Bishop E.J. Cuskelly as he authored the term ‘a spirituality of the heart.’ A careful examination of the contemporary culture in Vietnam is to be summed up in three aspects: lingering traditional values, post-war impacts, and the process of globalisation.

So what can the spirituality of the heart offer in dialogue with the Vietnamese culture today, especially in Ho Chi Minh city (or Saigon) where the MSCs are building the first foundation? In what ways can it humbly challenge the culture in terms of human dignity, human integration, and human wholeness? After only ten years since the MSCs came to Vietnam bringing with them the heart spirituality to a new culture and people, these questions cannot be addressed with definite answers but they will be dealt with through more visionary responses, which hopefully will contribute to the development of a genuine dialogue between the culture and the spirituality in the land of one hundred-and-eighteen Christian martyrs. Looking into the future, the spirituality of the heart in Vietnam would be envisioned as a leading model for a new evangelisation which is less pragmatic and more contemplative. Therefore, it could be judged as ineffective and theoretical. But surely heart spirituality is not about quantity but primarily quality, not external but more internal.

### *Introduction*

The MSC mission in Vietnam is the latest outreach mission of the Australian Province. It is treasured and fostered by the Province and other provinces within the international community. As a Vietnamese-born Australian MSC, I feel encouraged and inspired to contribute to the building up of a theological and spiritual foundation for the Vietnam mission. I would like to begin my essay by defining the spirituality of the heart—the essence and the reformed expression of our Founder’s charism and spirituality. Next I will examine today’s Vietnamese culture, particularly in urban areas like Ho Chi Minh and other surrounding regions, with three main characteristics: traditional, post-war and globalised. After that, going through some typically cultural aspects, I am going to suggest some dialogical interests—both affirming and challenging to the culture—that the heart spirituality can commit itself to. Finally, looking into the future, I will briefly offer thoughts about the future opportunity and challenge of this spirituality in an emerging evangelisation.

### *The Spirituality of the Heart*

Let me start by noting that although this spirituality of the heart began and developed in the mission of Father Jules Chevalier (1824 – 1907), the term ‘spirituality of the heart’ was not used until after the renewal prompted by Vatican II. And so, let me develop the general concept of charism and spirituality of the founder of a religious congregation, what our Founder’s spirit was, and what Bishop E. J.

Cuskelly—a Missionary of the Sacred Heart—meant when he articulated the term ‘a spirituality of the heart’ as a new expression of the Founder’s spirit.

Charism is a gift of the Spirit to an individual for the good of others. It provides the founder with a focus or vision on some particular aspects of Jesus’ life, and leads him/her to follow Jesus and to serve others in specific ways<sup>1</sup>. However, charism as an outpouring of grace of the Spirit exists not ‘out there’ but when embodied in people’s way of life—spirituality. ‘Charism forms the heart of a spirituality; every sound spirituality is the embodiment of a charism.’<sup>2</sup> Charism and spirituality are two faces forming one coin of the spirit of a founder, so that one cannot be fulfilled without the other.

Carefully examining the Constitutions of the three Congregations founded by Father Chevalier—the MSC, the Daughters of our Lady of the Sacred Heart and the MSC sisters—Cuskelly draws out the gist of Chevalier’s spirit: (1) a deep concern for all people, (2) a belief in the love of God revealed in Christ, a belief that this love is the answer for all human questions and the source of our mission, (3) this love is revealed through charity, gentleness and kindness.<sup>3</sup> This charism was a fruit of his genuine search for a response to the illnesses of his time: egotism and indifferentism—to which Karl Marx (1815 – 1883), his contemporary, was endeavouring to find a solution. However, while Marx was convinced that the only solution was violent disruption—destroying the old and building a new egalitarian society—Chevalier envisioned a new world emerging from the Heart and Love of God revealed in Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Chevalier writes:

During his [Jesus’] mortal life, he was happy to pour out all the tenderness of his heart on the little ones, the humble, the poor, on those who suffer, on sinners—and on all the miseries of [humankind]. The sight of a misfortune, an unhappiness or any pain, touched his heart with compassion.<sup>5</sup>

The humanly compassionate heart of Jesus—appearing on every page of the Gospel—



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reveals the unfathomable love of God for each one of us throughout our life and beyond it. The author of the first letter of John expresses it in this way: ‘So we have known and believe the love that God has for us’ (1 Jn 4:16). Cuskelly beautifully describes the love of God as not like our human love—we love someone when we see the goodness and loveliness in them; but ‘God loves us into our existence’<sup>6</sup>—meaning God loves us before we are formed, and our being and existence are created entirely by God’s transformative love. A belief in this love of God for each one of us and for all leads to a conviction that this love is able to give meaning and purpose to human life, and it can touch deeply into the desires and restlessness of our hearts.

This reflects what Cuskelly called ‘a spirituality of the heart’ in replacing the older expression of ‘the devotion to the Sacred Heart’ which merely evokes a set of pious practices and prayers. After Vatican II, in the renewed spirit in the Church, we need a new expression for our charism, an expression that is sound and relevant to the signs of the time.

The spirituality of the heart can be summed up in four main journeys. The first journey is the journey to the depth of our heart to realise our own longings and desires for true life, love and liberation. The second journey is the journey of faith, inspired and guided by the Spirit, to the Heart of Christ in order to find the living water to quench our yearnings through prayer, reflection and contemplation. By these inner journeys, our heart is to become an understanding, giving and open heart, and so enables us to

make the third journey of going out to our brothers and sisters—‘To be on earth the Heart of God.’ And lastly, the fourth journey is the journey of perseverance and fidelity in the face of difficulties and challenges.<sup>7</sup> Today’s world still desperately needs the faithful and constant presence of the Heart of God in human form, as Jesus, throughout his life, was to his world.

### *The Contemporary Culture in Vietnam*

Vietnamese contemporary culture is a complex topic due to the mixing of traditionally cultural values and Western cultural ideologies, a consequence of the colonial years under the French and Americans in the last century as well as after the Cold War and the normalisation of relations with America in 1995. Through research<sup>8</sup> and my own life experience, I have nominated three characteristics describing the Vietnamese culture nowadays—traditional, post-war, and dramatically globalised.

Traditionally, Vietnamese culture, as many other Asian cultures, is an ancient culture and civilisation which has been developed over three thousand years and consists of a variety of ethnic cultures. Some argue that there is no Vietnamese culture but only a blend of ‘Vietnamese ethnic cultures’—highlighting the diversity of different cultures of the various ethnic groups. And even though many traditional values have been forgotten by the younger generations, especially those living in the urban areas, some of these values, to a great extent, still remain in people’s lives. Andrew Lam recognises that regardless of the rapid cultural revolutions happening in Vietnam, the society remains private and traditional.<sup>9</sup> This is surprising as ‘private’ is not a traditional characteristic of the culture but perhaps a recent influence of Western individualism. ‘Community’ or ‘village life’ is more likely to be a traditional value of the culture which has been significantly lost in city life today. However, filial piety is still an important and respected value in families and society in general. Family relationship remains a significant and enduring part of the young

Vietnamese growing up, despite the social issues which can endanger the stability and intimacy of family life. Recently, I have observed a revival movement of filial piety in Vietnamese contemporary music, which the people find quite touching and delightful.

Attached to this characteristic is the value of harmony, not only in family but in the wider society. Influenced by Confucianism during their long history, the Vietnamese tend to maintain a hierarchical order in communal life based on their age and position. The young should respect the old. The laity should obey the priest. This value is still deeply rooted in the people’s mentality, even with those who have left the country for a long time.

Another traditional characteristic which still lingers is the religiosity of the people. Vietnamese culture is a multi-religious culture—Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Caodaism and many other minor religions. Even for those who do not belong to any religion, the cultural and religious rituals or practices are still parts of their cultural life.

The second aspect of the contemporary culture in Vietnam is the aftermath effect of the wars and colonisation. The long-standing oppression and tremendous suffering of wars in the past have hugely shaped the Vietnamese culture today. The people have become humble, more adaptable to change, gaining amazing perseverance through difficulties. Nevertheless, the scars of war have left in the people an unconscious anger which, in my observation, has not yet been addressed appropriately. The communist government’s dictatorship today is perhaps an example of the unacknowledged anger which has made the oppressed become the oppressors. Seventy percent of the Vietnamese population is under thirty years of age—they hardly remember the war and the sufferings that their parents and previous generations had experienced. The memory of war has disappeared quite quickly from the consciousness of later generations. ‘Nobody owns it,’ Thomas Fox says in his article about Vietnam after twenty-five years of peace.<sup>10</sup> The rebellion of

the younger generations towards their elders might be a sign of the challenging transition of Vietnam from a time of war to a time of socio-economic development. It can also be seen as a revenge of the young against the old for their deceptions.<sup>11</sup> There seem to be socially and culturally internal angers.

Furthermore, the wars and colonisation have left Vietnam in devastation and poverty. Despite its significant growth and adaptations to the world economy, Vietnam remains an economically developing country. The economic gap between the rich and the poor in society is significant. The rich becomes richer, and the poor poorer. Social issues e.g. unemployment, poverty, insecurity, corruption, drugs, prostitution, AIDS all menace a gracious and hospitable culture.

The third aspect of the Vietnamese culture, as with other countries in Asia today, is the impact of globalisation<sup>12</sup>—manifested particularly in the urban regions of Vietnam. Observing the life of the Vietnamese youth nowadays, Lam points out three features of their lifestyle: *di quay* – to go wild, get drunk and stir up trouble; *song voi*—to live fast, to hurry life and to spend away; *van hoa toc do*—a culture that moves at high speed.<sup>13</sup> And Fox states that Vietnam is a young nation which adapts the foreign cultures ‘in the speed of light.’<sup>14</sup> The effect of this process of globalisation is most evident in terms of sexuality or sexual life of the young people. The Vietnamese culture once was very careful, even conservative, in sexual expression, now has become so dramatically radical as to scandalise the older generations. Indeed Vietnam has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world.<sup>15</sup> The globalisation in Vietnam—the migration of other cultures and ideologies from developed countries—not only brings financial and economic benefits to the people and country, but it also challenges the traditional culture and, perhaps, triggers a new adopted expression among the young for the socially and culturally inattentive angers from the traumatic past of wars and oppression.

### *The Encounter of the Spirituality of the Heart and the Vietnamese Contemporary Culture*

Even though Catholics only make up around eight percent of the population, Vietnam is perhaps no longer a ‘mission-receiving’<sup>16</sup> country as when Alexandre de Rhodes first arrived in the seventeenth century. The Christian churches are well-established and the Catholic church is even ‘exporting’ its vocations mainly to developed countries due to the shortage of vocations in those places. In a situation like that, what can the spirituality of the heart offer to the Vietnamese Church and culture? How can this spirituality be inculturated in people’s lives?

In *Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam*—a collective journal published in 2013 in celebration of a decade since the MSCs formally established their foundation on the land of the martyrs—the Australian MSC Provincial at that time recalls the assurance of the Vicar for Religious in Vietnam: ‘the Church of Vietnam needs your spirituality.’<sup>17</sup> I wonder why he said it so surely. I think it is because our spirituality has something that touches people’s deep desire and something to challenge the culture.

Christianity was first seen as a religion of mutual love in Thang Long (now Ha Noi) because of the love that the first Vietnamese Christians showed one another.<sup>18</sup> One can see from the previous section that the traditional values of Vietnamese culture—filial piety, harmony and religiosity—embrace the realm of relationship. Love and relationship are interconnected. Love is the most genuine source and means for relating, and true love cannot exist without the expression of relating. I think that is why the Vietnamese were so receptive to Christianity, as long as it is proclaimed in the terms of relating and connecting. In his latest article reflecting on ‘Mission, Culture and a Spirituality of the Heart,’ Anthony Arthur (MSC) states that the spirituality of the heart—containing *kenosis* and *koinonia* aspects—is

actually the culture of the Divine. He asserts that the culture of the heart is about ‘weaving relationships, and establishing risky inter-personal communication.’<sup>19</sup> The spirituality of the heart is the representation of the core value, meaning and purpose of both the Old and the New Testament; it is also the only purpose why God came into the world in the person of Jesus: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...’ (Jn 3:16). Jesus sums up the Torah with two commandments—love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Mt 22:37–39). He himself gives a new commandment that ‘you love one another’ (Jn 13:34). In the Asian Synod of 1998, the Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam declares:

...that is why the Church in Vietnam thinks of evangelisation first as a sharing in life, a life as Jesus himself lived it: a life of love for all, a love which goes to the end (cf. Jn 13:1), so that he dares to sacrifice his life for those he loves (cf. 5:13).<sup>20</sup>

In the same document, the Vietnamese Bishops reassert the cultural relevance and attraction of the relational image of Father/Son in the culture of loyalty, filial piety and humanity. Cuskelly, in his essay ‘With a Human Heart,’ skilfully draws out the invitation of God to love with a human heart—with all its weaknesses, struggles and inconsistencies—in the encounter of the resurrected Jesus and Peter in John’s Gospel (Jn 21:15–19). He states that Jesus expects of Peter, and all of us, not a confident love with absolute fidelity and obedience, but a humble, deep and affectionate friendship that endures through failures and weaknesses.<sup>21</sup> In other words, God invites us into a relationship, not with the angelic heart, but with our most genuinely human heart, with our deepest humanity. The humanity of the spirituality of the Heart—I usually describe it as ‘the down-to-earth character’—needs to be emphasised and brought forth into the Vietnamese culture as a reminder that it is an integral part of the culture from tradition, and needs to be revived to let people love truly and genuinely as who they are. I find an excit-

ing foundation that the spirituality of the Heart can be dialoguing with the Vietnamese culture: humanity and relationship, or a genuine human relating. This is not a new concept for the Vietnamese, but it needs to be reaffirmed and to grow practically in everyday life.

Furthermore, despite progress, the majority of Vietnamese people are struggling in poverty with an average earning of one dollar per day.<sup>22</sup> Peter C. Phan emphasises a triple dialogue of evangelisation in Asia—dialogue with the people, especially the poor and the marginalised, dialogue with their religions, and dialogue with their cultures.<sup>23</sup> The Vietnamese Bishops in the Synod also stressed that the only sign the Christians in Vietnam should be recognised by, is the sign of love for our brothers and sisters (cf. Jn 13:35), ‘a preferential love for the poor.’<sup>24</sup> The Constitutions of the MSC uphold the spirit of the Founder in a commitment to this love, and to social justice: ‘The spirit of our Society is one of love and kindness, humility and simplicity; it is above all, one of love for justice and concern for all, especially the very poor.’ The spirituality of the Heart is not a practical economic force that would purge away the poverty in society, but it is a transformative power that comforts, encourages and liberates people from within. The focus of the heart spirituality is not God or the love of God from ‘outside in,’ but it is about discovering an immanent God and a love that ‘breaks out from the inside’ of our humanity. People are truly free when they are liberated from the inside. At the same time, heart spirituality should be open to some appropriate, spirit-filled and discerned opportunities to challenge the root of social injustice, to speak out for the poor and the oppressed. But this must take into account the great risk of living under the current communist regime.

Additionally, reflecting on the significance of the Asian Synod, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila talks about the unacknowledged dynamism of globalisation in evangelisation in Asia today:

When one says ‘be true to the worlds of Asia’ it

means more than just a nostalgic thing in terms of costume and colours. Are we facing the contemporary worlds of Asia affected by this globalisation of cultures and values which has been changing the cultural and the human landscape? What is Asia now?... The Church must confront the fast-changing, dynamically changing cultures that define the worlds of Asia today.<sup>26</sup>

It is because of this dynamism of globalisation that I find it difficult to identify the typical characteristics of Vietnamese contemporary culture. Examining Vietnamese culture in the big cities at the present time, it seems to be more American and Korean-like than traditionally Vietnamese in perspective.

One of the tremendous effects of globalisation is the loss of identity and the restlessness of human beings.<sup>27</sup> In this dilemma, heart spirituality, I believe, is the way of leading people back to their heart, rediscovering their own identity, and relieving their restlessness through the humanly, immanent and mysterious love of God manifested in Christ. Also, this spirituality is not a pragmatism—in the sense of visibility, people cannot see the external changes and effectiveness—but it is a contemplative way of life, because the changes primarily happen within the human heart, the temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> This way of life is inevitably a solid challenge to the lifestyle of globalisation in which exist an unthoughtful and unreflective culture of immediacy and instancy, an impersonal era of machinery and advanced technology, and a materialistic—driven global society. This way of life challenges people to stop and think, to take time out in silence and reflection. This way of life demands of people that they meet others as human persons—instead of machines or virtual persons—to look them in the eye, to establish and maintain personal relationships with them regardless of the disturbance and messiness in their relating. Finally, this contemplative way of life will remind people of what is at the heart of the fundamental basis of human life and identity—the material or the spiritual?

### *A Vision into the Future: Challenge and Opportunity*

Last year, the MSCs celebrated their tenth year of presence in Vietnam. Challenges and opportunities for the MSCs remain unclear as we have not been registered as a religious congregation in the country, thus cannot spread the spirituality of the heart on a wide scale to see how it may touch and change people's lives. However, positive signs are present. One of our Vietnamese MSC seminarians told me how the religious sisters were indignant with his 'contemplative' approach in his pastoral ministry. He was taking his time to converse, to listen and just to be with the residents in a Catholic-run nursing home, instead of helping the sisters with their work around the place. Despite the sisters' implicit demand, he went on doing his 'ministry of presence,' and as a result, the old people there really appreciated his presence with them. They said: 'No one has done this to us before; the sisters are always busy.' These seemingly opposite responses, I believe, can pinpoint the future opportunities and challenges for heart spirituality in Vietnam.

On the one hand, the mission of evangelisation in Vietnam is no longer a means of propaganda for converting and baptising pagans, but has gradually become a task of informal and non-institutional dialogue—with culture, people, their life struggles, joys, hopes and desires.<sup>29</sup> Originating from a belief in the goodness of humanity through the revelation of Christ and a firm conviction of the love of God for each person, heart spirituality is an ultimate foundation for personal exploration and revelation, interpersonal interaction, and trans-personal experience which encompasses a wider vision of reality. In this sense, heart spirituality should be present in the Vietnamese Church as a leading and prophetic model for future evangelisation.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the process of transformation and liberation in the human heart does take time—even a lifetime for people to grasp the mystery of God's love for them.

It is a paradoxical reality that even though this secret is already within each person, it seems so deep that its recognition and recovery need quite some time and effort. Furthermore, despite how beautifully described in the theological and spiritual writings, heart spirituality is still a contemplative way of life—so far from the pragmatic effectiveness that people expect. The number of baptisms and converts means nothing in the way of the heart. Only those who truly interact and grow with it know how effective and meaningful it is to their lives. In a materialistic and consumerist society and culture, how can one—even the optimist—dare to imagine how the young, the majority of the country's population, may understand this contemplative spirituality? Perhaps, in this case, living action will speak louder than beautiful words.

### Conclusion

The spirituality of the heart cannot be a merely theological and theoretical thing, but must be the heart of humanity with all its real experiences and life-changing power; it is, above all,

an expression of the Heart of the Divine manifested in Christ which fearlessly embraces all that is human and makes all become divine. In a traditionally relational and communal, torn-by-wars and globalised culture, Vietnam can be both the fertile and rocky soil for the seed of Father Chevalier's way of the heart. The seed can be choked or bear great fruits (cf. Mt 13:1-9).

Theologically speaking, it would be a leading model for a new evangelisation in Vietnam due to its compatibility and relation with the traditional values, and its ability to challenge some of the adaptations and changes present in the emerging culture. The Vietnamese culture was once unique—it might be still the case in some rural areas—and it needs to remain so, regardless of being inundated with the cultural influences of other developed countries. But this will happen only when the people, especially the young, experience the need to look into themselves in order to rediscover the hidden and buried treasure of tradition which has made them who they are today, and to invent new ways of expressing these values and identity relevant to today's context.

### FOOTNOTES

1. E. J. Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier - Man With A Mission 1824 – 1907* (Rome: Casa Generalizia - Missionari Del Sacro Cuore, 1975), 110.
2. Hans Kwakman, *Jules Chevalier's Charism and the Identity of the Chevalier Family* (Manado, Sulut: P.T. Percikan Hati, 2011), 18 – 19.
3. E. J. Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 113.
4. See the article of Anthony Arthur in *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 'Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam' (Kensington, NSW: Focus Press Pty Ltd, 2013), 10.
5. Chevalier, *Meditations*, Vol. II, p.32 quoted in E. J. Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 117.
6. E. J. Cuskelly, 'With A Human Heart,' in *With A Human Heart*, ed. by E. J. Cuskelly, 8 - 26 (Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Press, 1981), 10.
7. See E. J. Cuskelly, 'With A Human Heart,' 40.
8. Some of my research for this essay have been done through the interviews with some of the Vietnamese MSC students, some of the Australian MSCs working in Vietnam Mission, and a Vietnamese diocesan priest from Vietnam who is studying in Australia and living with us at Blackburn.
9. Andrew Lam, 'AIDS Menaces a 'Liberated' Vietnam,' *National Catholic Reporter* 40, no. 36 (August 2004): 22.
10. Thomas C. Fox, 'Vietnam After 25 Years,' *National Catholic Reporter* 36, no. 26 (April 2000): 13 – 19, 15.
11. Andrew Lam, 'AIDS Menaces a 'Liberated' Vietnam,' 22.
12. According to Archbishop Tagle of Manila, this is the general situation in Asia. See James H. Kroeger, *Asia-Church In Mission* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1999), 86.
13. Andrew Lam, 'AIDS Menaces a 'Liberated' Vietnam,' 22.
14. Thomas C. Fox, 'Vietnam After 25 Years,' 15.
15. Andrew Lam, 'AIDS Menaces a 'Liberated' Vietnam,' 22.
16. The term quoted from the Synod of Bishops -

- Special Assembly for Asia, 'Lineamenta,' *Vatican* (1996), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_01081996\\_asia-lineam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_01081996_asia-lineam_en.html) (accessed May 11, 2014), #15.
17. Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, *Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam* (Kensington, NSW: Focus Press Pty Ltd, 2013), 15.
18. Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod - Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 50.
19. Anthony Arthur, 'Mission, Culture and A Spirituality of the Heart,' *Compass* 48, Autumn issue (2014): 21 – 29, 21 – 28.
20. Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod*, 50.
21. E. J. Cuskelly, 'With A Human Heart,' 15 – 16.
22. Thomas C. Fox, 'Vietnam After 25 Years,' 16.
23. Peter C. Phan, 'The Next Christianity - Asian Catholicism is theologically far ahead,' *America* 188, no. 3 (February 2003): 9 – 11, 10.
24. Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod*, 50.

25. *Constitutions and Statutes of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, (Rome, 2005), #13. At one stage, Chevalier wanted to form a Christian political party in France to fight for the poor and the underprivileged; however the Pope did not permit his proposal (see Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, *Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam*, 12.
26. James H. Kroeger, *Asia-Church In Mission*, 86.
27. Anthony Arthur, 'Mission, Culture and the Spirituality of the Heart (Part 2)' (2014), unpublished material, 5.
28. Ibid.
29. Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 153.
30. This spirituality can be a founding ground for an open and genuine interreligious dialogue which is so vital in Vietnam. However, regarding to the length limit of this section, this aspect is not discussed in detail.

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