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# amnesty international

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## Socialist Republic of Viet Nam

### Appeal for:

### Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan)

11 May 2005

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An early photo of  
Brother Nguyen Thien  
Phung (Huan)

Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan), 54 years old, is a member of the Congregation of the Mother Coredeptrix (CMC) who has been imprisoned for the last 18 years. He was among a group of 23 Roman Catholic monks and priests arrested in May 1987 for holding training courses and distributing religious books without government permission during raids on Thu Duc monastery, near Ho Chi Minh City.

In October 1987 he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment plus five years' house arrest on release for "*conducting propaganda to oppose the socialist regime and undermining the policy of solidarity*" under broadly defined national security legislation. His sentence was upheld by the Appeal Court on 7 November 1988. The other 22 monks arrested were also sentenced to between four years and life imprisonment; all have now been released except for Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan).

Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan) is detained at prison camp Z30A, Xuan Loc, Dong Nai province, where conditions are harsh, with an inadequate provision of medical treatment and a poor diet.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan) as a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of religion and expression by his activities as a member of the Congregation of the Mother Coredeptrix.

#### Official charges

Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan) was brought to trial in October 1987 along with 22 other members of the CMC. Before the trial at least two articles were published in the official media describing the arrest and presumed guilt of the members of the CMC.

On 4 November 1987 the state-controlled *Viet Nam News Agency* broadcast a report about the trial of the 23 defendants which began on 27 October and lasted for four days. The report describes how security forces, after leading a series of searches from 15 to 20 May 1987, discovered and arrested members belonging to an "*anti revolutionary organization*" and seized "*many books and documents containing distortions of the socialist system*". It also accused the CMC of running training courses for the purpose of disseminating "*anti communist ideas*" and mobilizing "*hundreds of Catholic believers*" who clashed with the security forces, seriously wounding a policeman on duty.

In reply to these accusations on 25 May 1987 Father Dominic Tran Dinh Thu, the founder of the CMC, wrote a statement to the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Viet Nam. In his letter he denied all accusations made against him and members of the CMC. He said that they had cooperated fully with the requests of the security forces that had carried out an administrative inspection of the buildings. He stated that the documents which were seized, which included prayer books, were recorded by the officials as not containing “*an immoral, anti-government or propagandist attitude*”. In describing the clashes which occurred, Father Thu said violence only broke out when the local people objected to the confiscation of the rice, even though the priests and monks had asked the people to allow the bags of rice to be taken away. He also said that members of the CMC asked the people to disperse, but they would not do so.

### **Background**

The Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix was founded by Father Dominic Tran Dinh Thu in 1942. In February 1953 the congregation was officially established as a Religious Order under Canon Law by the Vatican. In 1954 the Congregation moved south with thousands of other Catholics who feared persecution following the division of the country into North and South Viet Nam. Following the establishment of the SRV in 1975 after decades of civil war, members of the CMC, along with thousands of other people were required to report for “re-education”. Many of them were released after a short time, but the founder, Father Dominic Tran Dinh Thu was detained for two years without charge or trial. Congregation property was seized and members harassed by the authorities as part of an attempt to repress unofficial churches.

The Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix is an evangelical order whose aim is “*to promote the glory of God and the sanctity of its members by practicing the three religious vows.*” It’s “*special aim*” is for its members to “*bring non-Christians to God through the establishment of orphanages, asylums, hospitals, student residences and so on; especially through operating schools at various levels.*” In Viet Nam the Congregation reports that its main success until 1986 was training lay people who wanted to join; apparently over 50 training sessions were held for 1000 heads of households from several different dioceses.

### **Religious freedom in Viet Nam**

The Vietnamese government retains control over religious institutions and requires religious organizations of all faiths to be affiliated to the Communist Party-run Fatherland Front. Government permission is still required for many religious activities to take place.

Article 70 of the Constitution states: “*Citizens have the freedom to believe or not to believe in a religious faith. All religions are equal before the law. ... No one may violate the freedom of faith or exploit it in a way that is at variance with the law and state policies*”. The practical results of this are that freedom of belief and worship are in fact heavily restricted, as the wider concept of freedom of religion as enshrined in international human rights standards, particularly freedom of “*worship, observance, practice and teaching*” is not included in the Constitutional guarantee.

Individuals who are active in religious groups which do not have state approval are likely to have their rights to freedom of association and expression curtailed by the authorities. Those people who are linked to religious groups that are not part of the state-sanctioned churches are frequently harassed, arrested and imprisoned.

The groups most affected by these restrictions are Roman Catholics and the CMC congregation, the Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam (UBCV), Hoa Hao Buddhists, members of the Cao Dai church and members of the evangelical Protestant community.

## **Appeal for the release of Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan)**

### **Please write:**

- Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan), who has been imprisoned for 18 years in harsh conditions as a prisoner of conscience, in contravention of international human rights standards.
- Calling on the authorities to ensure that Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan) is allowed to receive adequate food and appropriate medical care in accordance with international standards.
- Expressing concern that although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Constitution of Viet Nam, the practice of religious belief is strictly controlled by the state in law, thus effectively criminalizing those who choose to worship in non-state sanctioned churches.
- Urge that all prisoners of conscience detained on account of their religious beliefs be immediately and unconditionally released.
- Encourage the government to ensure full implementation of the international human rights instruments which it has ratified

### **Addresses for appeals are:**

**Tran Duc Luong**  
**President**  
Office of the President  
35 Ngo Quyen  
Ha Noi  
Socialist Republic of Viet Nam

Salutation: President

Fax: + 844 734 0815 (c/o The National Assembly – please mark “For the attention of President Tran Duc Luong”)

**Phan Van Khai**  
**Prime Minister**  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Hoang Hoa Tham  
Ha Noi  
Socialist Republic of Viet Nam

Salutation: Prime Minister

Fax: + 844 199 2682 (c/o Ministry of Foreign Affairs – please mark “For the attention of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai”)  
Email: [ptt.mfa@mofa.gov.vn](mailto:ptt.mfa@mofa.gov.vn)

**Le Hong Anh**  
**Minister of Public Security**  
Ministry of Public Security  
15 Tran Binh Trong Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
Ha Noi  
Socialist Republic of Viet Nam  
Fax: + 844 942 4381

Salutation: Minister