



Researching cognition and faith through symbolism in Catholic churches in Vietnam: A case study of the Archdiocese of Hanoi City

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Abstract

Introduced to Vietnam in 1533, Catholicism has shaped new cultural values, among which the system of churches is a tangible cultural component. Hanoi represents a significant center for the development of Catholic architecture and art in northern Vietnam. Despite numerous studies on symbols in general, as well as religious and cultural symbolism, specialized research on Catholic church symbols in Hanoi remains limited, particularly in comparison with studies of Catholic indigenization in the Global South. This study utilizes the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics and the anthropology of symbolism method, combined with fieldwork and in-depth interviews. By surveying the symbolic system within Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Hanoi City, the research emphasizes that every architectural component and symbol within a Catholic church carries profound theological and symbolic significance, rather than being mere decorative elements. The research results indicate that Catholic symbolism functions as a bridge of faith between the visible and the invisible, between the earthly and the heavenly, and between the congregation and God. Symbols are considered the visualization of the invisible, a cornerstone of faith, and a connection between humanity and God. Furthermore, symbols serve as a foundation for strengthening religious

emotion and faith. The interwoven presence of Western-origin symbols and indigenous Vietnamese cultural elements within church spaces clearly reflects the process of Catholic inculturation and indigenization, situating Hanoi within a broader comparative dialogue with models of Catholic indigenization in Africa and other Global South societies. Consequently, the study contributes to expanding the approach to Catholic symbolism as a global religious phenomenon that is simultaneously shaped by specific local contexts.

Keywords: Religious symbolism, Catholic symbolism, Catholic church, Archdiocese of Hanoi, symbolism and faith, Vietnam

Introduction

In religious life in general, and Catholicism in particular, symbolism is not merely an element of artistic decoration but also a means of conveying the depth of faith, contributing to the shaping of religious cognition and nurturing the spiritual life of the faithful community. In Vietnam, the system of Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Hanoi is one of the oldest Catholic centers and features numerous architectural works with a rich system of symbols, interweaving Western and indigenous elements. However, this symbolic value is often approached only from the perspective of art or architectural history, while its role in shaping the cognition and faith experience of the faithful has not been systematically and deeply explored. In

Vietnam, as with other religions worldwide, Catholicism has a system of places of worship, such as churches, which vary in architectural style and scale. A Catholic church, regardless of its size or architectural style, aims primarily to affirm God's presence and to serve as a place to gather the congregation and celebrate the Mass. Within the church, every architectural component holds a very significant theological and symbolic value. No decorative motif or symbol in the church is without meaning. Conversely, without faith, religious emotion, or knowledge of Catholicism, these architectural elements, decorative motifs, or symbols are merely ornaments, like those found in other secular buildings. Furthermore, symbolism in a Catholic church is not just a decorative scheme; more importantly, each symbol

and its combinations express theological, spiritual, cultural, and artistic values. Symbolism is the visualization of the invisible, a cornerstone of faith, a bridge between the faithful and God, and it plays a crucial role in strengthening and cultivating faith, hope, and love. Since Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in 1533 in Ninh Cuong and Quan Anh villages in Nam Chan district, and Tra Lu village in Giao Thuy district (now part of Nam Dinh province, Bui Chu diocese), Vietnamese Catholicism has had a history spanning nearly five centuries. With almost five centuries of development in Vietnam, the Catholic religion has established new cultural values. The sublime humanist values of Catholicism, its scientific knowledge, its writing system (Vietnamese National Language Script), its festivals, and its tangible cultural assets, most notably the system of churches, have become an integral component of Vietnamese culture. Due to its status as the cultural, political, and economic center of the country, Hanoi has long been representative of the Diocese of Tonkin (the Outer Region) and later the northern Archdiocese. Consequently, the architectural, sculptural, and graphic art values in the Catholic churches of Hanoi are of a high standard and share characteristics with

major Catholic churches worldwide, especially those with French architectural styles. The system of Catholic churches in Hanoi has been the subject of research in various fields such as history, architecture, fine arts, art, and painting. This study examines the relationship between symbolism, cognition, and faith within the church space—how images and symbols impact the psyche and religious behavior of the faithful. This is particularly crucial in the context of modern society, where religion faces numerous challenges in transmitting faith and preserving identity, making such research essential for both pastoral and academic purposes. Therefore, the Archdiocese of Hanoi was chosen as a case study to explore the characteristic symbolic system within its typical churches, while also investigating how the faithful receive, interpret, and internalize these symbols in their life of faith. This approach addresses a significant research gap in Vietnam, contributing to the theoretical and practical foundation for research on religious culture, especially in the current context of interplay between tradition and modernity. The research findings from these various fields have helped to clarify the values of Catholic churches in Hanoi. In this paper, we focus on

studying, classifying, and determining the function, faith value, and cognitive significance for clergy and lay believers of the system of symbols in Catholic churches within the Archdiocese of Hanoi.

Research methodology

To investigate the aforementioned issues, we employ the cultural semiotics theoretical framework to approach and decode symbolism. This serves as the foundation for exploring the nature of symbols, decoding their value-meaning systems, and explaining how they function as an intermediary mechanism between religious belief systems and human perception. This approach situates symbols within specific religious practices to understand their role and impact on the faithful's life of faith. Cultural semiotics facilitates the analysis of symbols not merely as visual images but as structures with profound layers of meaning that reflect religious belief systems, values, and traditions, thereby clarifying the cognitive and didactic functions of symbols within sacred spaces. Consequently, the research can elucidate how symbols form, transmit, and reinforce sacred messages in holy space. Through this perspective, the study further illuminates the processes by which sacred meanings are formed,

transmitted, and reinforced within the holy space.

The anthropology of symbolism method is utilized to situate symbols within the culture of the Catholic church, seeking to understand the relationship of symbols to the religious emotions, faith, and cognition of Catholics. According to this approach, although a symbol may be a "static" object of study in terms of its form, it plays a "dynamic" role in religious practice, as it is interacted with, interpreted, and its meaning reproduced through prayer, liturgy, and the spiritual life of the believers. This approach allows for an authentic and vivid examination of the connection between symbols and elements of cognition, emotion, and religious belief, thereby clarifying the process of internalizing faith through symbolic forms of expression.

Fieldwork and interview methods are employed to record the opinions and evaluations of the dignitaries (priests, monks, nuns) and Catholic laity within the Archdiocese of Hanoi City. This approach provides direct insight into how religious subjects interpret and experience symbolic meanings in their daily expressions of faith, thereby enabling a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of

the function and significance of symbols within the religious practice of the Catholic Church. This was implemented through systematic on-site surveys at several representative churches in the Archdiocese of Hanoi (St. Joseph's Cathedral, Ha Dong Church, Thai Ha Church, etc.). Comprehensive and structured observations were recorded of the symbolic system embedded in the architectural design, decoration, and liturgical rituals. The fieldwork process was further strengthened by in-depth interviews and focused conversations with target groups such as priests, religious members, catechists, and lay faithful. Interview questions focus on the participants' interpretations, perceptions, and lived experiences of faith as mediated through symbols within ecclesial spaces, thereby demonstrating the role of symbols in shaping the religious cognition and collective spiritual identity of the believing community. The documentary analysis method is used to collect theological texts, canon law, as well as previous research materials related to religious symbolism, architectural symbolism, and faith cognition. The comparison of theoretical frameworks with empirical findings helps to clarify the specific ways in which symbols are used and received within the

Archdiocese of Hanoi. This comprehensive research methodology ensures a holistic approach to symbolism from both theoretical and practical perspectives, thereby contributing to a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the relationship between symbolism, cognition, and faith in the contemporary religious context of Vietnam.

Literature review

Symbolism is a prevalent phenomenon in the religious sphere, reflecting both the depth of faith and the cultural distinctiveness of the believing community. In contemporary religious studies, symbols are increasingly perceived not merely as means of theological expression but as intermediary mechanisms that shape human cognition, experience, and the internalization of faith. In the Vietnamese context, particularly in Hanoi—a city with a long history and profound cultural exchange—symbols in Catholic churches are not merely aesthetic elements but also carry a sacred meaning, deeply shaped by processes of indigenization (or localization). This approach relates to studies of Catholicism in the Global South, where the process of inculturation is regarded as a central driver in the formation of religious symbolic systems. Research on symbolism, therefore,

necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing theology, cultural anthropology, religious history, and Christian art (or Christian aesthetics). The following overview will present the main approaches found in relevant studies, focusing on four content areas: the history of the formation and development of the Catholic Church in Vietnam; the theoretical basis and general research on symbolism; studies on symbolism in Catholic churches; and the Catholic theological foundation related to symbolism.

First, regarding the history of the formation and development of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, numerous scholarly works have provided a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the process of Christian evangelization and inculturation from the 16th century to the present. Nguyen's (1994) *A Brief History of the Vietnamese Church* is a foundational document that identifies the main periods of Church history: from initial evangelization and periods of persecution (or religious prohibition) to the colonial era and post-colonial development. This approach can be placed in dialogue with studies of Christianity in Africa, where missionary expansion has consistently involved processes of cultural negotiation and the

reconstruction of indigenous symbols (Mbiti, 1990; Sanneh, 2009). Do (2008), in *Reflections on the History of the Vietnamese Catholic Church*, emphasizes the factor of indigenization—an essential aspect for understanding the formation and development of church symbolism in Vietnam. Nguyen's (2018) *Catholic Churches in Vietnam* is a valuable resource, providing systematic information on the architecture, function, and cultural value of churches across Vietnam, including Hanoi—a city notable for churches that exemplify the interaction between Western architectural forms and local cultural traditions.

At the local level, the Archdiocese of Hanoi has been examined in works such as *Christianity in Hanoi* by Nguyen (2008) and *Religion and Belief Life in Thang Long – Hanoi* by Do (2010), clarifying the social context, the role of the church as both a religious and cultural institution within the urban setting, and the interaction between church architecture and the modern urban faith space. Such research provides a crucial foundation for understanding church symbols not merely as architectural artifacts but as components that participate in the construction of religious cognition in the context of urbanization.

The second body of scholarship concerns the theoretical foundation of symbolism and religious symbols. In cultural and anthropological research, a symbol is regarded as a form that conveys layers of sacred meaning that cannot be fully expressed verbally. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1997, p.26), in *Dictionary of Symbols*, describe a symbol as a "channel of communication between the phenomenal world and the metaphysical world", thereby expanding the sacred space through visual and spiritual perception. This conceptualization aligns with the interpretation of John S. Mbiti (1990), who argues that religious symbols play a pivotal role in structuring the worldview and religious cognition of believers' communities in Africa. In Vietnam, Trinh (2018), in *From Sign to Symbol*, systematized theories of symbolism within the social sciences and humanities, emphasizing the historical, communal, and interpretative nature of symbols. Similarly, Dinh (2014), in *Symbolism Studies: Some Theoretical Approaches*, situates symbolism within broader discussions of power, identity, and the process of cultural cognition.

The third body of research focuses on symbolism within Catholic churches, specifically in relation to architectural, artistic, and liturgical expression. Le

(2014), in *Vietnamese Catholic Art*, demonstrates the blending of Western art with Vietnamese folk art along the timeline of history, evident in the shaping of tile roofs, the use of color palettes, and decorative motifs like dragons, phoenixes, lotus flowers, and rosettes. Meanwhile, Long and Thu (2013), in *Catholic Culture from the Perspective of Church Symbolism*, approach the issue from a cultural studies viewpoint, analyzing symbols as a sacred aesthetic language tied to the believing community. More recent studies, such as those by Do (2020, 2025) on symbolism in Catholic churches in Hanoi, conducted fieldwork in churches across the city, highlighting the polysemy (multiple meanings) in symbolic interpretation, especially in the modern context where the faith experience has become more personalized and complex. These findings can be situated in correlation with research conducted in Africa, where liturgical symbols and church architecture are regarded as vital instruments that enable the faithful to access and internalize their faith (Mudyiwa & Mokgoatšana, 2021; Asojo & Asojo, 2015).

Furthermore, a group of international texts, such as Schloeder's (2015) *Architecture in Communion*, offers a theological approach to architecture,

emphasizing the symbolic nature of the church's spatial structure in expressing the mystery of faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) (2008) shows that the linguistic and symbolic elements in Catholic rites are expressed through gestures, postures, body language, worship space, objects, artworks (icons, images), music (hymns, chants), decorations and decorative elements (flowers, vestments, liturgical seasons and colors), as well as spoken words (homilies, Scripture readings). From the sacristy, where the priest puts on vestments until the conclusion of the Mass, a great variety of actions and objects are used, each possessing its own significance. Additionally, several forms of religious art and symbolism in the Catholic Church will be discussed, including: the worship space, objects, artworks (icons, images), decorations and decorative elements (flowers, vestments, liturgical seasons, and colors), along with their meanings. These items will be presented in main groups within the article. This approach is further reinforced by studies on Catholicism in the Global South, which emphasize that liturgical art and symbols serve as central conduits, enabling the believers' community to participate in and comprehend their faith within a specific cultural context

(Sanneh, 2009). Kendall (2017) emphasizes the material dimension of religious objects, demonstrating that sacred statues and images are not immutable but are subject to processes of deterioration and transformation over time. In addition, Kendall (2008) further elucidates the "spiritual life" of religious artifacts in contemporary Vietnam, highlighting their close entanglement with everyday religious practices. These studies suggest that religious symbols not only carry sacred meanings but are also embedded in changing material conditions and the lived practices of religious communities (Kendall, 2008, 2017). Eke (2020) provides an in-depth analysis of the role of Catholic symbolism and worship art—from the chalice and candles to images—in guiding the faithful into spiritual depth. The Catholic Church is a religious institution that extensively uses symbols and art in its liturgy and worship. This study introduces the reader to the use of certain symbols, art, and decorations within the Catholic Church, highlighting their meanings and how they impact spiritual life, helping the faithful advance (or grow) in their life of faith.

Finally, any analysis of symbolism in the Church must be grounded in Catholic theological foundation. Ratzinger (2010), in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, affirms

that symbols are a means by which the faithful can recognize the presence of God in the visible world. Miller (2016), in *25 Questions About Catholic Symbols of Faith*, systematically presents the main signs in the Catholic faith, particularly through liturgical rites and church design. Orthodox Catholic documents such as Nguyen's (2009) in *Introduction to Christology* also demonstrate that symbols are essential to shaping the faithful's interior life and sense of the divine mystery. When placed in dialogue with the anthropology of religion, these theological approaches allow symbols to be understood not only as catechetical tools but also as cognitive structures that shape the inner spiritual life of believers.

The overview of the aforementioned studies demonstrates that research on symbolism in Catholic churches in Vietnam is a multidimensional field, connecting categories of history, architecture, culture, theology, and personal experience. However, compared to studies in Africa and other regions of the Global South, the analysis of symbols in Vietnamese Catholic churches has tended to remain largely descriptive and theologically interpretive. fully explored symbols as a cognitive mechanism and an inculturation of faith embedded in the daily lives of the faithful. Particularly, in

an urban context like Hanoi, where modernity, secularism, and tradition intertwine, the ways in which the faithful perceive, interpret, and internalize symbols have not been systematically investigated. This gap underscores the need to study Catholic church symbols in the Archdiocese of Hanoi City through the aspect of cultural semiotics and symbolic anthropology, thereby placing the Vietnamese case study in dialogue with broader research on Catholic inculturation within a global context.

Research results and discussions

Catholicism in Hanoi

Catholicism arrived in Vietnam relatively late compared to major religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism. It was not until the 16th century that missionaries first set foot on Vietnamese soil, marking the beginning of the missionary effort in Vietnam. According to research documents and records, the history of the Archdiocese of Hanoi spans nearly 400 years of formation and development.

The Jesuit Missionary Period (1626 – 1663): The start of evangelization in the Diocese of Hanoi is specifically marked by the arrival of Fr. Giuliano Baldinotti, an Italian, and Brother Piani, a Japanese, the first two missionaries sent to Ke Cho (Thang Long, the old name for Hanoi) in

1626. However, the mission work of these two priests did not achieve significant success.

The missionary work in Ke Cho, in particular, and the Diocese of Hanoi in general, achieved its initial success through the efforts of Fr. Marques and Fr. Alexandre de Rhodes (Dak Lo), who began their mission in Tonkin (the Northern Region). On March 12, 1627, Marques and de Rhodes withdrew from Macau for Cua Bang (Thanh Hoa) on March 19, 1627. Upon arriving in Ke Cho, they were warmly received by Lord Trinh (Lord Trinh), who provided favorable conditions for the mission that greatly facilitated their missionary work. They were granted many favors and provided with housing in the Lord's residence. However, to facilitate closer contact with the populace, they were requested to reside in the Cau Den area. There, they began holding catechism classes, with each course lasting 8 days and consisting of 6 sessions daily. It was from these teaching sessions that the collection *The Eight-Day Catechism* was drafted, which de Rhodes had printed in Rome in both Latin and Vietnamese in 1651. After three years of missionary work, the two were expelled from Ke Cho. During those three years, they baptized 5,602 people.

The Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) Period: On September 9, 1659, the Holy See established two Apostolic Vicariates in Vietnam: the Inner Region (Cochinchina/Southern Region) and the Outer Region (Tonkin/Northern Region), appointing Bishop François Pallu as the Apostolic Vicar of Tonkin (1659–1679). Throughout his tenure as Apostolic Vicar, Bishop Pallu repeatedly attempted to reach Tonkin to take up his post but was constantly hindered. Consequently, he entrusted Bishop P. Lambert de la Motte with the administration and appointed Fr. F. Deydier Phan as the Vicar General (or Pro-Vicar) of the diocese. In 1679, the Holy See appointed Bishop Pallu as the Bishop of the Diocese of Fujian. On January 27, 1684, he finally set out to take up his post in Tonkin but passed away nine months later.

On August 18, 1666, Fr. Deydier arrived in Thang Long to carry out his missionary mandate. In 1669, Bishop Lambert de la Motte arrived in Pho Hien (Hung Yen). In early 1670, he ordained seven priests and 48 clerics in minor orders, presided over the first Synod at Pho Hien, and established the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross at Kien Lao and Bai Vang. During the French Colonial Era (1883–1945): In 1895, the Holy See divided the Western Diocese (Western

Diocese) into two dioceses: one retaining the old name, the Western Diocese, and the new one named the Doai Diocese (Hung Hoa). In 1902, Pope Leo XIII further divided the Western Diocese of Tonkin into two dioceses. The new diocese was named the Thanh Diocese (later Phat Diem). On February 3, 1924, the Holy See changed the names of the Apostolic Vicariates in Vietnam according to the administrative district where the episcopal see was located; thus, the Western Diocese of Tonkin was changed to the Apostolic Vicariate of Hanoi (or Diocese of Hanoi). Bishop P.M. Gendreau Dong (Titular Bishop of Chrysopolis) governed the diocese from 1887 to 1934. In addition to investigating and compiling martyr records, he carried out extensive social work and established organizations for the education and training of both the laity and the clergy. In 1935, the Indochina Plenary Council was inaugurated.

During the tenure of Bishop F. Chaize Thinh (Titular Bishop of Alabanda, 1925–1949), the 1935 Indochina Plenary Council paved the way for the development of public education and the expansion of educational, training, and charitable social organizations. In 1937, a social research club was inaugurated, leading to the development of the

Catholic Action movement. According to the 1930 report, the diocese had 27 missionaries, 143 Vietnamese priests serving in 88 parishes, 400 catechists, and about 400 nuns, including the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross, the Carmelite cloistered nuns of Hanoi, the De La Salle Brothers with 700 students, the French Dominican Order, and the Congregation of Our Lady. By 1948, the diocese had approximately two million inhabitants, with about 195,000 Catholics, 30 missionaries, 135 priests, 95 religious brothers, and 491 nuns. The Major Seminary of Saint Sulpice (Xuan Bich), which had closed after the incident on December 19, 1946, was reopened in 1948. Following the Patronate Treaty (1884), the missionary effort in Hanoi in particular and the Diocese of Hanoi in general began to flourish again. Many powerful churches in Hanoi were constructed during this period: "In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, churches and large institutions, mainly built by missionaries, followed French or Spanish architecture. These included churches in the Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, and Baroque styles" (Bui, 2009).

The Period of the Vietnamese Hierarchy: In 1950, Bishop Joseph Maria Trinh Nhu Khue was appointed Bishop of Hanoi. In November 1960, the Holy See decided to

establish the Vietnamese Episcopal Hierarchy (or Vietnamese Hierarchy), elevating the Apostolic Vicariates to the status of Dioceses. Consequently, the Diocese of Hanoi was raised to the rank of an Archdiocese, with Bishop Joseph Trinh Nhu Khue appointed as the Archbishop. In June 1963, the Holy See Appointed Bishop Joseph Trinh Van Can as the Coadjutor Archbishop of Hanoi. Following the passing of Cardinal Khue, he succeeded as the Archbishop Ordinary. On June 30, 1979, Pope John Paul II appointed Archbishop Trinh Van Can as a Cardinal and Bishop F.X. Nguyen Van Sang as Auxiliary Bishop.

On May 18, 1990, Cardinal Trinh Van Can passed away after a severe illness. On April 23, 1994, Pope John Paul II appointed Bishop Joseph Pham Dinh Tung as the Archbishop of Hanoi and Fr. Paul Le Dac Trong, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Hanoi, as Auxiliary Bishop. On November 26, 1994, the Holy See elevated Archbishop Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung to a Cardinal in Rome. He was elected President of the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference (CBCV) during the 6th General Assembly in Hanoi from September 25 to October 1, 1995. He actively worked to consolidate the Saint Joseph Major Seminary in Hanoi and the

spiritual life (or life of faith) of the faithful.

On April 26, 2003, the Pope accepted the retirement request of Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung and appointed Bishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet, Bishop of the Diocese of Lang Son, as the Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Hanoi. On April 22, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed Bishop Peter Nguyen Van Nhon as the Coadjutor Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Hanoi, and on May 13, 2010, he was installed as the Archbishop Ordinary of the Archdiocese of Hanoi after Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet retired due to illness. On November 17, 2018, the Holy See announced the acceptance of the resignation of Cardinal Peter Nguyen Van Nhon, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Hanoi, and at the same time, Pope Francis appointed Bishop Joseph Vu Van Thien as the Succeeding Archbishop. On December 18, 2018, Archbishop Joseph Vu Van Thien officially took office as the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Hanoi and is the 6th Archbishop of the Archdiocese. After nearly 400 years of evangelization, the Diocese of Hanoi now has a relatively large Catholic population compared to other dioceses in Vietnam. Currently, the Archdiocese of Hanoi has approximately 330,000 faithful engaged in religious

activities across 151 parishes organized into six deaneries (Statistics from the Archdiocese of Hanoi, 2021). Notable churches in the area include St. Joseph's Cathedral (Hanoi Grand Church, built in 1884), Phung Khoang Church (built in 1910), Cua Bac Church (Shrine of the Holy Apostles, built in 1925), and Ham Long Church (St. Anthony of Padua Church, built in 1934), among others.

Structure of Catholic Churches in Hanoi

Symbolism plays a pivotal and inseparable role in the Catholic church, closely intertwined with the architecture to create a unified whole. To fully analyze symbolism, one must consider the historical development and the church structure in relation to the distribution of symbols. The structure of a Catholic church is generally built according to the regulations of Canon Law.

According to Nguyen (1998, p.40), "a parish church typically has the following structure: the bell tower, the side aisle for proceedings, the narthex (or vestibule), the choir loft, the nave, the sanctuary (or chancel), and the sacristy". Viewed comprehensively from above, the architectural blueprint of contemporary churches often resembles a Latin cross, divided into sections with different functions. These sections do not only

have utilitarian value but also embody symbolic, doctrinal, canonical, and theological significance. The bell tower always serves as a focal point, typically rising above the church roof. It may or may not have a spire, but a cross is usually placed at the very top. The bell tower not only signified the wealth and prosperity of medieval cities but also served as a watchtower during wartime. Above all, the bell tower represents the sacred and calls the faithful to return to God. Inside the bell tower, there are often Western or Southern bells, with five main functions outlined by Nguyen (1998, p.112): Praising the true God; Calling the people; Gathering the clergy; Mourning the deceased; and Adoring the feast days. Currently, many churches have freestanding bell towers, and some have additional pointed flames on either side. Beneath the bell tower, there are typically three or five entrances to the church. The facade of the bell tower often features a statue of the parish's patron saint, such as the statue of Saint Joseph at Hanoi's St. Joseph's Cathedral. The Narthex (Vestibule) is often where the Baptismal Font is located, serving as a reminder that the Sacrament of Baptism is the gateway to the Church. The Paschal Candle is usually placed beside the font. Above the narthex, there is generally a

choir loft for the choir, although many churches now position the choir closer to the sanctuary.

The Nave, from the Latin word "navis" meaning ship, symbolizes the Ark of the Church sailing towards Heaven. This is the main space reserved for the laity to participate in the liturgy. Within the nave, there are always fourteen Stations of the Cross, depicting the Passion of Jesus. The Stations may hang on columns or walls. In some churches, images or statues of saints are also hung or placed on the nave columns for veneration and prayer by the faithful. A confessional (or penitential room) is also usually located in the nave. The 1983 Code of Canon Law, Canon 964, stipulates that: "(1) The proper place for hearing confessions is a church or oratory; (2) The Bishops' Conference is to establish norms regarding the confessional, ensuring that there are always confessionals available in a visible place that are fitted with a fixed grille between the penitent and the confessor, so that the faithful who wish to may freely make use of them". The location of the confessional is within the architectural blueprint of the church, although it may be moved to various positions within the nave.

The Sanctuary (or Chancel) is the most central and solemn area, where the Mass (or Eucharistic Celebration) is performed. The sanctuary is the focal point of the church where the altar, the ambo (or pulpit), the presider's chair (or cathedra), and the tabernacle are located: "The sanctuary should be distinguished from the nave either by a difference in height or by special structure and ornamentation. The sanctuary must be large enough for the convenient carrying out of the sacred rites and to be easily visible". The altar is the location for offering the Mass and often contains relics. The tabernacle is where the Blessed Sacrament (Consecrated Host) is reserved, usually placed at the center of the sanctuary. The ambo is the place for proclaiming the Word of God. The presider's chair is reserved for the presiding priest.

The Sacristy is the place where liturgical vessels and vestments are kept and where the clergy vest before the celebration of the liturgy. The sacristy is the final structural component of the church, storing the objects used in Catholic liturgical rites. The sacristy is usually a small room behind and lower than the sanctuary: "The sacristy, also known as the vestry, is a small room in the church or chapel. It is where liturgical objects are

stored and is also typically where the ministers put on their vestments before the beginning of the liturgical celebration" (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 2016). The sacristy also plays a vital role in preparing the liturgical rites and ensuring that those rites are completed in a dignified and reverent manner.

The system of symbolism in Catholic Churches in Hanoi

The system of symbolism within Catholic churches in Hanoi comprises eight main groups (numbered 1 through 8), categorized into symbols of adoration (The Holy Trinity) and symbols of veneration (The Virgin Mary, the Saints). Additionally, there are symbols reflecting inculturation.

The symbols of adoration in Hanoi's Catholic churches consist of one group: (1) The Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2096, provides specific instruction on the adoration of God: "The first act of the virtue of religion is adoration. To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love. Jesus said to him, "You shall worship the

Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 2016). The symbols of veneration consist of six groups:

- (2) The Virgin Mary: Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of La Vang, Our Lady of the Assumption, Our Lady of Grace (or Miraculous Medal), Our Lady of Sorrows, etc.
- (3) Apostles and Evangelists: including the four evangelists: John, Luke, Mark, Matthew, and the 12 Apostles of Jesus: Saint Peter, Saint Andrew, Saint James the Greater (Son of Zebedee and brother of John), Saint John, Saint Simon, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Thomas, Saint James the Less (Son of Alphaeus), Saint Philip, Saint Jude (Thaddeus), Saint Matthew, and Saint Matthias.
- (4) Sacred Objects/Vessels: The Censer, Holy Water font/vessel, bells, the Paschal Candle, the Monstrance, the Chalice, the Ciborium, etc.
- (5) Flora and Fauna: The Vine, wheat, the rose, the chrysanthemum, etc.
- (6) Numbers and Characters: Alpha and Omega, PX, M, LHS...

- (7) Other Symbols/Saints: Major Saints of the Church, such as Saint Joseph, Saint Anthony, and the patron saints specifically chosen by that church...

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1195, addresses the veneration of the Saints:

In the liturgy of the Saints, and first of all of the Mother of God, the Church on earth proclaims the Paschal mystery fulfilled in them, who have suffered and been glorified with Christ. The Church proposes them to the faithful as examples who draw all to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she begs for God's favors.

Canon Law of 1983, Canon 1186, specifically stipulates:

To foster the sanctification of the people of God, the Church commends to the special and filial veneration of Christ's faithful the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, whom Christ constituted the Mother of all people, and promotes the true and authentic cult of the other saints, by whose example the Christian faithful are

instructed and through whose intercession they are sustained.

Inculturated Symbols: Symbols reflecting cultural integration (or localization) include some typical Vietnamese cultural symbols used in Catholic churches in Hanoi, such as: (8) The Four Sacred Animals (Tu Linh: Dragon, Unicorn/Kylin, Tortoise, Phoenix); The Four Seasons Plants (Four Seasons: Pine, Chrysanthemum, Bamboo, Yellow Apricot), ...

The characteristics of the symbolic system in Hanoi demonstrate variations in scale, arrangement, and quantity, depending on the status and resources of each church. Cathedrals (like the Mother Church or episcopal seat) typically possess a more diverse symbolic system. The density of symbols in Hanoi tends to be sparser compared to other dioceses like Bui Chu and Phat Diem. Some important symbols in global Catholicism may be absent in Hanoi. The symbols are mainly concentrated in the nave and the sanctuary.

Based on a survey (31 out of 65 parishes in Hanoi City), the study generalizes several characteristics of the symbolic system in Catholic churches in Hanoi as follows:

First, Scale and Status: The scale and status of the church significantly influence the quantity, arrangement, and richness of the symbols. Churches with a central role, such as St. Joseph's Cathedral, typically possess a more diverse, elaborately arranged, and higher-quality artistic symbolic system compared to mission churches or smaller, isolated parishes. For instance, Phu My parish has a richer symbolic system than smaller establishments like the Giang Xa mission church.

Second, Non-Uniformity of Expression: The form of symbolic representation is not entirely uniform across churches, even when expressing the same theological or doctrinal content. Each church tends to develop its own style regarding the proportions, size, color, material, and craftsmanship (or technique) of the symbols, reflecting the creativity and resources of the local faithful community.

Third, Financial and Spatial Factors: Financial resources and spatial scale are determining factors in the level of investment in the symbolic system. For example, large churches with favorable economic conditions and those serving as pilgrimage centers like Bang So Church often feature symbols that are larger,

more vividly colored, and more exquisitely detailed. Conversely, smaller churches like Dong Lao Parish, constrained by area and budget, typically have symbols of a moderate scale, focusing on basic, easily recognizable forms.

Fourth, Lower Symbolic Density: The density of symbols in Hanoi's churches is generally not high (or sparse), especially when compared to dioceses with long-standing traditions like Bui Chu or Phat Diem. This characteristic reflects restraint in ornamentation, as well as a prioritization of spacious liturgical areas, which aligns with religious practice and the conditions of community life in an urban environment.

Fifth, Moderate Artistic Quality: The artistic quality and level of sophistication of the symbols remain moderate. Many symbols are crafted in a simpler style, focusing on recognizability and catechetical function (teaching the faith), and have not yet reached the high level of artistry seen in some major churches globally or other traditional Catholic centers.

Sixth, Limited Presence of Universal Symbols: The presence of some important symbols within the universal Catholic symbolic system is still limited in certain Hanoi churches. The primary reasons

include budget constraints, construction space, and the prioritization of developing other components necessary to meet the parish's practical needs.

Seventh, Concentration in Interior Space: The spatial arrangement of symbols is mainly concentrated inside the nave and the sanctuary, which are considered the most sacred centers, where the priest celebrates the liturgical rites and the faithful gather for prayer. Some auxiliary symbols may be placed outside to create architectural focal points and serve outdoor religious activities, but the main role remains with the interior symbols.

Discussions

Catholic symbolism serves as a bridge between the visible and the invisible.

Throughout the developmental process of Catholicism, God is understood to exist in both a visible and an invisible dimension. In the Catholic faith, God is the origin of all things, the Creator of everything visible and invisible, bringing all things into being from nothing, in time—spiritual beings like angels, and material things like the cosmos. Therefore, God is the transcendent being, surpassing both space and time. He is beyond all things and all spheres of humanity and all creation, both visible and invisible.

Consequently, it is difficult for humans to perceive God's presence through the eyes of natural reason (or natural intellect); instead, such perception occurs through the eyes of faith. Nevertheless, for God to be visibly present through the eyes of the faithful, the Church utilizes a system of symbols to render His presence tangible in the lives of the laity. In the in-depth interview survey, a question was posed focusing on the understanding, perception, and faith experience related to symbols in Catholic churches within the Archdiocese of Hanoi. The question to a priest was: "Father, do symbols help nourish the faith and holiness in the lives of the faithful?" Father G.T.M.Q (personal communication, September 20, 2024) responded, "I believe that symbols in the church are meant to lead the faithful to the mystery of faith, just as the Cross is not only a symbol of sacrifice but also an invitation to live a life of love". When surveying the faithful (laity), the question was: "What symbol in the church do you find to be particularly meaningful to your life of faith?" Ms N.T.N shared, "Every time I look up at the statue of the Blessed Mother, I feel consoled and as if a mother is listening to my joys/sorrows, and that my confessions and apologies are acknowledged. I feel that I have health and a deeper love for life connected with

my faith". (personal communication, September 20, 2024).

One of the functions of symbolism for the life of Catholic laity is precisely to act as a bridge between the visible and the invisible.

God, as the invisible being, cannot be seen by anyone, nor can His true countenance be sculpted or drawn. Consequently, the Church made the historical decision to permit the creation of symbols representing God and the saints to illustrate God more vividly for its faithful. It is difficult for humans to perceive God's visible presence using the eye of reason. However, when contemplating the symbols within the sacred buildings, the faithful sense God's presence in a visible manner. This visibility is not a physical movement or contact of the symbols with people; rather, it is a visible perception based on faith. They believe that these symbols contain the presence of the invisible God, and His power is being revealed clearly before the eye of faith. For example, when the faithful contemplate the statue of the crucified Jesus in the sacred churches (Image 19, Appendix 4), they perceive the reality of sacrifice, as well as the triumph of Jesus. Similarly, when observing Eucharistic symbols, such as

the stained-glass image at Hanoi Cathedral, all Catholics understand that they represent the Body and Blood of Jesus shed to save humanity. The symbol of the dove, present in almost all the sacred buildings surveyed by the author, is one of the invisible manifestations of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. Ms N. T. H, a Catholic layperson, stated:

For me, just seeing the symbol of the three circles immediately makes me think of the mystery—the One God in Three Persons—which is a characteristic way to recognize the Triune God. When I see the image of a dove in church, I immediately think of the Holy Spirit because it is one of the symbols representing the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is through these symbols that we can recognize our invisible God, the one we always trust. (Ms N. T. H, personal communication, October 15, 2024).

Symbolism in Catholic churches also expresses the relationship between the visible and the invisible.

The symbol itself is the visible element—the physical object that the faithful can see and perceive with their direct,

intuitive sense (or visual perception). Yet, hidden within this visible element is the invisible, which the faithful sense when contemplating these symbols. They perceive the spiritual presence of God in these. For instance, the Alpha and Omega symbol, derived from the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, symbolize the eternal nature of Jesus Christ. The Paschal Candle in Catholic churches recalls Jesus' words: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The visible signifies the invisible, and through the visible, humanity comes to know the invisible. Regarding this matter, Father Joseph V.C. V, the pastor of Nam Du parish, stated:

"It is difficult for human beings to recognize the invisible God with the naked eye. However, when Jesus—the Only Begotten Son of God—came down to earth as man, the image of God was most concretely revealed (or manifested). When the Lord ascended to Heaven, the Apostles preached the Word of God everywhere, forming a widespread Church. To help the faithful perceive the invisible God through faith, the Church permits the creation of symbols for veneration and adoration, and through these, they come to know the Invisible

One. Thanks to these visible symbols, the life of faith of the laity is firmly consolidated upon the foundation of Scripture, doctrine, and the system of symbolism within the sacred churches". (personal communication, November 16, 2021).

Catholic symbolism as a bridge between earthly life and Heaven

Catholic believers consistently hold that earthly life is temporary; it is a pilgrimage toward Heaven, and life in Heaven is the true life (or authentic life). Earthly life is a period for the faithful to be purified in preparation for entering eternal life in Heaven. No one can see Heaven while alive; only after death can it be fully perceived. This can cause the laity to feel bewildered, even though they have been strengthened by Scripture and doctrinal teaching that forms their hope in the Heaven promised to the righteous. To solidify the faith of the laity and their trust (or fiduciary reliance) in the future eternal life, the Church utilizes paintings to depict Heaven where God dwells, and also uses the church space and its symbols to render as authentic a representation of Heaven as possible. Visualizations of the majesty of the

heavens, along with the presence of the Holy Trinity in the clouds and the saints prostrate (or bowing) before God's face, help people imagine the scenes in Heaven as described in Scripture. Through the contemplation of these symbols, the faithful develop a heavenly perspective in which God dwells with His saints, just as the symbols in the church are arranged according to ecclesial norms. In addition to the system of symbols that establishes a connection between earth and Heaven, some churches are explicitly decorated with representations of Heaven through paintings and bas-reliefs (or carved panels). For example, at Phu My Church, there are two bas-reliefs illustrating human life after death: one depicts Hell (The place of eternal punishment or the state of eternal separation from God's love for the fallen angels and those who die rejecting God's love), and the other depicts Heaven. This helps the laity perceive Heaven in the best possible light as a place where goodness is manifested and fulfilled. Therefore, when attending church, the faithful contemplate symbols that align with their mental images of Heaven, which have been revealed through Scripture and the church doctrine. This makes the faithful feel as though they are already experiencing a foretaste of Heaven, with the presence of

Saint Peter and Paul at the church doors, the presence of the Holy Trinity, the ministering Angels, and His Saints. Mr. V. D.C, a 46-year-old layperson from Ke Set parish, shared: When I come to church, I feel almost as if I'm entering a sacred space—a place where God, my

Creator resides. Moreover, I get to interact with the symbols of the Holy Trinity, the Angels, and His Saints, which makes me joyfully feel like I'm already in Heaven, returning to the One I love and worship. But it doesn't stop there; these feelings about heavenly life help me live better on earth, so that after death I may go to Heaven and behold the face of God, for that is also the purpose and meaning of my life, allowing me to live a purposeful life on my journey of faith. (personal communication, November 16, 2024).

Catholic symbolism as a bridge between the flock and God

In Catholicism, the faithful are often affectionately referred to as the flock. The image of the sheep symbolizes the Catholic people, signifying unity within a single flock. Jesus likens Himself to the Good Shepherd and gathers all the sheep

into one unified fold. The sheep and God always share an intimate relationship, like that between the shepherd and his flock. However, it is challenging for the faithful to perceive God in a visible manner. God's sheep often use deductive reasoning (or inference) to come to know God. While this is not a perfect method, it helps the flock recognize the truth. This was the initial process God used to reveal Himself to His flock through Scripture. Nevertheless, this mode of inference often makes it difficult for the flock to know God fully. Arising from the practical needs in the lives of the faithful, the Church has taken new steps to meet these needs by permitting the use of visible symbols to express the faith and to narrow the gap between the flock and God, thereby strengthening the bond of shared belief. When the faithful come to God, they come to the sacred churches, the place where God resides, and where they express their veneration (or reverence) toward God. This intimate connection is expressed through prayers, listening to the Word of God, heeding the instruction of the priests, and participating in the breaking of the bread (the Eucharist), etc. But the faithful do not just engage in religious rituals; they also interact with a system of symbols related to the Holy Trinity, which recount

the earthly life of Jesus Christ, and symbols of the Blessed Mother, the angels, and the saints. These symbols, in part, express the contents of Scripture as well as the Christian mysteries celebrated during the Liturgy. In this way, God becomes present in a more accessible way—no longer distant or incomprehensible—but present through visible symbols. Ms. L.T. V. A (35 years old), a layperson from Bàng Sở parish, stated:

When mentioning Catholicism, the first symbol that comes to mind is the Cross because it is considered the symbol of the Faith, the love of the great King Jesus who sacrificed Himself for the redemption of humanity. Another highly revered symbol is the bread and wine (Chalice). This symbol represents the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and it is also the most exalted sacrament for Christians because by partaking in this sacrament, they receive the very Body and Blood of Christ to dwell in their hearts. Additionally, for me, the Rosary is also considered a symbol of Catholicism. The Rosary is linked to the prayers of humanity and the intercession of the Mother

Mary. The Rosary is also associated with many stories and miracles throughout history. Among these symbols—the Cross, the Bread and Wine, and the Rosary—the Cross is the most important symbol and the centrepiece of Christian faith. (personal communication, November 15, 2024).

These symbols are permitted for use by the Church solely for the purpose of helping the faithful to visualize their God in a more tangible way and to explain the mysteries that God has established within the Church. For example, when seeing the symbols of wheat and grapes, a layperson will immediately think of the mysteries established by Christ, which is the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Wheat symbolizes the body of Jesus; wheat also represents Christians who remain faithful amid the presence of the “weeds”—the “heretics”; Grapes are a symbol of the blood of Jesus shed for the redemption of humanity's sins. Grapes also symbolize fruitfulness and spiritual fulfillment in the Christian life. Similarly, upon seeing three interlocking circles, this is often used to symbolize the Holy Trinity. The circle symbolizes the eternal nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The three interlocking circles remind

believers that God is one, though revealed as three Persons (the Trinity). Through this visible form, believers can best visualize the Mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Based on the aforementioned analyses and fieldwork data, it can be affirmed that symbols within the Catholic churches of the Archdiocese of Hanoi City not only illustrate doctrine but also function as an intermediary structure that enables the faithful to connect their earthly life experiences with invisible spiritual realities through the experience of faith. The operational mechanism of this symbolic system indicates the remarkable similarities with studies on Christianity in Africa, particularly in the works of Mbiti (1990) and Sanneh (2009).

In Sub-Saharan African societies, Mbiti (1990) points out that the Christian faith is not received purely as an abstract dogma system but is internalized through symbols, rituals, and sacred objects familiar to the indigenous worldview. Similarly, in Vietnam, Catholic symbols such as the Crucifix, the Virgin Mary, the Eucharist, or the Holy Trinity do not function as mere decorative objects; they become the means through which the faithful perceive the living presence of God in their daily lives.

The key point of convergence between Vietnam and African countries lies in their shared religious-cultural orientation: both contexts are societies with strong religious traditions, where individuals tend to approach the sacred through experience, imagery, and symbols rather than through purely rational reflection. From the perspective of material religion, religious objects, images, and sacred spaces function as mediating forms through which believers experience and engage with the sacred in everyday life (Meyer et al., 2010). At the same time, religion can be understood as a "chain of memory" that transmits beliefs and traditions across generations through symbols, rituals, and material practices (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Findings from the Hanoi case study reveal a similar dynamic: church symbols not only nurture individual spiritual life but also reinforce the collective memory and religious identity of urban parishioners.

However, contextual differences must also be highlighted. While in many African Christian communities, religious symbols are often tightly bound to highly communal rituals, rich in performance and collective experiential elements, the context of Catholicism in Hanoi tends to emphasize inner depth, individual contemplation, and a private relationship

between the "sheep" and God. This distinction reflects the influence of East Asian cultural traditions, where interiority, silence, and individual spiritual life are highly valued.

Therefore, symbols in Catholic churches in Vietnam can be considered as a form of "inculturation of faith", whereby universal principles of global Christianity are embodied through cultural forms that resonate with the Vietnamese religious psyche and lived experience. Comparison with African cases shows that religious symbols are not only the way of transmitting doctrine but also a means of negotiating between global faith and local culture. This perspective constitutes a significant contribution of this research to broader discussions on Christianity, symbolism, and inculturation within the context of the Global South.

Catholicism serves as a foundation for consolidating religion.

Religious sentiment expresses the relationship of the faithful to issues in their religion when perceiving phenomena, objects, figures, and behaviors that have been divinized. Specifically, religious sentiment has the power to move one's body and soul, leading to transformations in a person's life. Religious sentiment is not gained

through coercion but through personal experience. It is created through a long process of testing and experiencing religion, as well as encountering life's daily events. A person who lacks sentiment for a religion will never follow it, and if they do, their faith will not be firm. Therefore, religious sentiments reinforce the faith of believers, making them steadfast on their journey following that religion. Along with other factors, religious symbols play an important role in the formation and reinforcement of religious sentiment. When approaching symbols from the perspective of sentiment, each person has their own unique feelings. Once awakened, these feelings become inner needs and aspirations that inspire individuals to strive for what is good within their religion. These are aspirations that transcend the trivial desires of the mundane world, overcome the challenging realities of life, and can even soothe life's pains. Symbols in Catholic churches function in a similar way. Though outwardly simple, when viewed through the lens of a layperson's sentiment, they become vibrant and mysterious. The faithful may experience emotions such as fear, love, admiration, reverence, joy, hope, anticipation, and more. This depends on the individual and

the specific symbol they interact with, along with their capacity to be moved by those symbols. Some symbols inspire such profound reverence that individuals momentarily forget their surroundings, leaving only themselves and the symbol in silence as they listen to the voice of the heart. Other symbols evoke fear just by thinking of them. For example, the relief sculpture depicting heaven and hell at Phu My Church: when contemplating the scene of heaven, the layperson feels their soul strengthened and encouraged to persevere on the path toward salvation. However, upon viewing the depiction of hell, they may experience deep fear, reflecting on the painful consequences of sin. These emotional responses help the faithful grow in spiritual maturity and become more steadfast in their life of faith, which is precisely the goal the Church aims for.

Religious sentiment, though simple, is the very beginning of the reception of faith. Symbolism is an important part of religious life, helping to reinforce belief and enrich the lives of the faithful. This effectiveness, however, is lost when a symbol is approached by someone who has no faith in that religion, because it is regarded merely as a tangible object rather than being viewed through the lens of religious faith. To perceive the

symbols in Catholic churches with the eyes of faith, Catholics have their faith strengthened through reason and personal discernment. This formation draws upon the teachings of the Scriptures, Catechism, Canon Law, and the guidance of Catholic clerics. This process firmly reinforces their faith, preventing it from being shaken when they interact with these symbols. A person without faith only sees the symbol as wood or stone, a view that is not accepted by the Church, and which the Church would not venerate. However, when symbols are viewed through the eyes of faith, they are imbued with specific meanings: they are used for decoration; for catechesis (teaching); and for veneration, due to the symbol's preeminence. A symbol becomes sacred not by its substance, but by the faith-filled intention and meaning attributed to it. The Catholic Church accepts symbols according to the meanings of usage, teaching, and veneration. This is a rightful and pious practice that that enriches makes the life of faith and contributes to the diversity and vitality of Catholic culture. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that viewing symbols with the eyes of faith should not be mistaken for superstition; rather, it is an expression of religious belief, an innate human

capacity whose growth and maturity depend on the openness of the individual believer.

Viewing symbols with the eyes of faith makes them sacred symbols, affirming the presence of the Creator within them. Catholics regard these objects as sacred, sometimes even more esteemed than themselves. According to the history of the Catholic Church, many Catholics have accepted martyrdom rather than desecrate or profane these symbols. They understood that deliberately trampling upon a sacred symbol, especially under coercion, could signify a denial of their faith in God and rejecting the beliefs they have received.

Mr. P. M. Ph, a 26-year-old Catholic layperson living in Ke Set (Lang Tam) parish, stated:

"It is difficult for human beings to perceive the invisible God with the naked eye. When Jesus—the Only Son of God—came down to become man, the image of God was revealed concretely. After the Lord ascended to Heaven, the Apostles preached the Word of God everywhere, forming the universal Church. To allow the faithful to sense the invisible God through faith, the Church permits

the carving of symbols for veneration, worship, and recognition of the Invisible One. Thanks to this, the life of faith of the laypeople is firmly consolidated on the foundation of Scripture, Catechism, and the system of symbols in the churches. (personal communication, October 20, 2024).

Thus, within the Catholic context of the Archdiocese of Hanoi City, symbols do not merely function to transmit doctrinal content; they act as direct agents that activate and sustain religious affect—the fundamental element for the formation and reinforcement of the faithful's faith. This function allows the Vietnamese case to be situated within a broader comparative framework with studies on African Christianity, where religious sentiment and emotional experience play a central role in the life of faith.

In his classic study of African religion, Mbiti (1990) emphasizes that religion is not merely a set of abstract doctrines but a lived reality embedded in everyday life, expressed through practices, feelings of awe, hope, and trust in the sacred world. Building on this perspective, studies of material religion suggest that religious

symbols, sacred objects, and ritual practices can evoke powerful emotional responses and enable believers to experience the presence of the sacred (Morgan, 2010). Findings from the Hanoi case study reveal a similar dynamic: church symbols evoke emotional states such as solace, awe, hope, reverence, and trust, thereby strengthening believers' long-term attachment to the Catholic faith.

However, compared to many African Christian communities, where religious emotions are often expressed strongly through collective forms such as singing, dancing, ritual performances, and bodily embodiment, religious affect in Hanoi is expressed with more restraint, leaning toward interiority and contemplation. This pattern reflects the interaction between Catholicism and East Asian culture, in which religious emotions are typically internalized and experienced through silence, meditation, and self-reflection rather than overt public display.

Despite differences in expressive forms, the fundamental similarity between Vietnam and Africa is in the central role of symbols in transforming individual emotions into sustainable religious belief. As Sanneh (2009) argued, the

inculturation of Christianity in Global South societies does not primarily occur at the aspect of dogma but at the aspects of experience and religious emotion. In the case of Hanoi, church symbols provide the space where individual emotions are validated within the framework of Catholic doctrine, helping the believers remain faithful to the universal faith while embodying that faith according to their own cultural rhythms. In comparison with African contexts, this study shows that religious affect, though expressed through different forms, remains the common foundation through which Christianity takes root in non-Western societies. This analysis contributes to broader scholarly debates on the relationship between symbolism, emotion, and faith in global Christianity.

Symbols in Catholic Churches as evidence of cultural integration

The presence of Western symbols in Catholic churches in Hanoi is clear evidence of the historical transmission of Catholicism from the West into Vietnam. When Western missionaries arrived in Vietnam, they brought not only the religion but also the artistic expressions of the faith, ranging from church architecture to images and liturgical

items. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, many large churches in Hanoi were built following French or Spanish architecture, featuring styles such as Gothic, Roman, Byzantine, and Baroque. As noted: "From the late 19th to the early 20th century, large churches and facilities were often constructed by missionaries, all adhering to French or Spanish architecture. These included churches in the Byzantine, Roman, Gothic, and Baroque styles" (Bui, 2009, p.295). Typical examples in Hanoi include St. Joseph's Cathedral (Nha Tho Lon, 1886), Phung Khoang Church (1910), Cua Bac Church (1932), and Ham Long Church (1934). These churches not only met the religious needs of the faithful but also contributed to shaping the urban landscape of Hanoi during the French colonial period. Notably, through the creativity of the parish priests and laypeople, churches combining Asian-European architectural styles were also constructed, demonstrating a harmonious blend of Eastern and Western cultures. Examples include Ha Hoi Church (1903) and So Ha Church (1917). Some Western symbols used in Catholic churches in Hanoi include Stained Glass: Large churches often feature very large, colorful stained-glass windows, often imported from France, depicting the Mysteries of

God and the life of Jesus, as well as images of the saints. St. Joseph's Cathedral and Bang So Church are typical examples. Sculptural works bearing distinct Western artistic imprints portray religious figures such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary, angels, and saints. Materials like bronze, wood, and stone are used. The crucifix sculpture made of Huong wood at Bang So Church is one example. The cross symbol is considered the central symbol of Christian faith, representing the sacrifice of Jesus for the redemption of humanity. Likewise, bread and wine/chalice are Symbols of the Body and Blood of Jesus, which constitute the highest sacrament for Catholics (The Eucharist). Images and statues of saints originating from the West, such as Saint Joseph (patron of St. Joseph's Cathedral), Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and the Evangelists John, Luke, Mark, and Matthew.

In addition to the marked Western influences, sources also point to the integration of Vietnamese culture within the symbols and architecture of Catholic churches in Hanoi. Firstly, hybrid Sino-European Architecture: Some churches were constructed in a style that combines Eastern and Western architecture, demonstrating the harmony between the two cultures. Ha Hoi Church and So Ha

Church are typical examples. Second, the incorporation of traditional cultural elements in decoration reflects theological and pastoral developments within the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council permitted missionary parishes to adopt local traditional cultural elements, provided they could be adapted to Christian rites. In Vietnam, some Catholic churches have integrated traditional cultural symbols into their decoration and construction. Third, traditional symbols such as the Four Sacred Animals (Dragon, Unicorn, Turtle, Phoenix) and the Four Seasons/Four Noble Plants (Pine, Chrysanthemum, Bamboo, Apricot/Plum) appear in some Catholic churches in Hanoi, demonstrating the adaptation of long-standing Vietnamese cosmological and aesthetic motifs within a Christian sacred context. Fourth, the Flower Offering Ceremony to the Virgin Mary represents a unique cultural practice of Vietnamese Catholics. This ceremony, which has a strong folk artistic nature, expresses reverence for the Virgin Mary. The flower-offering teams often wear the traditional Ao Dai. Fifth, ancestor veneration, despite its theological complexity, is still practiced by Catholics in Hanoi with its own unique features, such as placing the ancestor altar lower than the altar of

God. Sixth, the use of Golden Palanquins during the feasts of patron saints, the Month of Flowers, and the Month of the Rosary reflects another significant incorporation of traditional Vietnamese ceremonial forms into Catholic practice. This cultural integration has several causes. Firstly, it is the adaptation of Catholicism to the local culture so that it could take root and develop in Vietnam. Secondly, the creativity of the parish priests and the faithful also plays a crucial role in harmoniously blending Eastern and Western cultures. Thirdly, the Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council, adopted a more open policy towards incorporating local cultural elements.

For Hanoi Catholics, church symbols not only carry religious significance but also possess deep cultural value. Contemplating these symbols helps believers strengthen their faith, while also allowing them to access and appreciate cultural values. Even non-Catholics can feel the cultural and artistic value embodied in these symbols.

The aforementioned analyses demonstrate that the symbolic system within Catholic churches in Hanoi not only reflects the importation of Christianity from the West, but also it is

the result of a long-term process of inculturation, in which indigenous elements are reconstructed and integrated into the Catholic sacred space. This mode of integration allows the Vietnamese case to be situated in a broader academic dialogue with studies on African Christianity, where symbols and religious practices have also undergone profound indigenization.

In the African context, Mbiti (1990) and Sanneh (2009) both emphasize that Christianity can only take a sustainable root when it is "translated" into local symbolic language, worldview, and indigenous value systems. Recent research by Mudyiwa and Mokgoatšana (2021) also shows that in many African Christian communities, church architecture, sacred imagery, and liturgical rites have been restructured to reflect local traditional symbols, thereby creating a form of Christianity that is simultaneously universal and deeply imbued with indigenous cultural identity. The case of Hanoi reveals a similar process: Western symbols were not replicated in their original state but were "Vietnamized" through hybrid Euro-Asian architecture, flower-offering rituals, ancestor veneration, and the use of traditional cultural motifs. However, compared to many African societies,

where inculturation often occurs more visibly and dynamically in communal rituals and collective expression, the process of symbolic integration in Hanoi's Catholic churches is more selective. This reflects the specific socio-historical context of Vietnam, where Catholicism has long existed in relation to indigenous ideologies such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and ancestor worship. Therefore, inculturation in Catholic symbolism in Hanoi is not a total syncretism but a process of continuous negotiation between universal Catholic doctrine and traditional cultural values.

These findings are consistent with Bediako's (1995) argument that Christianity should not be understood as a fixed or static system but as a dynamic process that is continually reinterpreted within specific cultural contexts. Rather than being simply transmitted from its Western origins, Christian faith is reshaped through ongoing interaction with local cultures, reflecting the tension between its universal claims and particular cultural expressions. In Hanoi, church symbols become an intermediary space where Western and indigenous elements do not negate each other but coexist, complement each other, and re-signify one another. Comparison with Africa shows that while the forms of

inculturation differ, the underlying logic is similar: symbols play a central role in helping the faithful perceive faith as part of their daily cultural life. This reinforces the argument that inculturation is not merely a missionary strategy but an essential condition for Christianity to maintain its long-term vitality in non-Western societies. From this perspective, the case of the Archdiocese of Hanoi City provides significant evidence for global Christian studies, showing that church symbols are not just vestiges of missionary history but also evidence of the adaptability, transformation, and recreation of Catholicism within different cultural contexts. This is the convergence between Vietnam and Africa in the process of indigenizing Christianity, which constitutes the core academic contribution of this research.

Conclusion

Symbols within the Catholic Church function as visual, artistic elements and sacred languages that contribute to the transmission of faith, guide religious understanding, and nurture the spiritual life of the community of the faithful. Research on the Archdiocese of Hanoi, a representative Catholic center in Vietnam, shows that the majority of Catholics have a deep emotional and faith-based connection to religious

symbols, especially familiar ones such as the Crucifix, the statue of the Virgin Mary, the Eucharist, the image of the Good Shepherd, various types of stained glass, and holy pictures. A comparative view of missionary activity across Asia and Africa reveals significant parallels in timing and historical context. Although Christianity reached North Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia, Carthage) between the 1st and 4th centuries, its development was hindered by the rise of Islam from the 7th century. Intensive evangelization on both continents later occurred alongside European exploration and colonization during the 15th and 16th centuries, resulting in remarkably similar perspectives among missionaries of that era. The integration of indigenous cultural values into Catholic life in both Asia and Africa underwent a lengthy historical progression. This process gained significant momentum in the 20th century, particularly following the documents of Pope Pius XII, which affirmed the role of national character and folk traditions within mission territories. In the process of Catholic inculturation, nations in both Asia and Africa realized that Catholicism could not endure if it remained solely possessed of Western cultural traits. These traits had to be indigenized through Asian and

African perspectives on God. Due to the distinct cultural characteristics of each continent, God is perceived in "purely Asian" or "purely African" ways. In the Asian worldview, God is often seen as a philosopher or a Guru providing the way to liberation. For Africans, God takes on the persona of a Tribal Chief or a Healer, serving as the Protector of the community. Thus, the inculturation processes of the two continents are quite similar in content and form, both aiming for a more intimate perception of God by adopting symbols from the community's cultural worldview.

Furthermore, symbols serve as a common language between cultures. Divinity is expressed through symbolic systems; despite cultural differences, humans can recognize the common nature and mystery of God when contemplating these symbols. Divine nature is perceived through non-verbal contact. Therefore, symbols silently shape and bind human will within a religious worldview, contributing to the diversity of Catholic cultural symbolism. Vietnam has Our Lady of La Vang, depicted as a golden-skinned woman wearing the traditional ao dai and traditional Vietnamese turban (khăn xếp), cradling the Infant Jesus. Meanwhile, Africa venerates Our Lady of Africa with black skin and a crown, her

arms outstretched as a symbol of protection. However, the level of understanding and the ability to decode symbolic meanings among the faithful remain uneven, particularly across different generations and social groups. This reality indicates a certain gap between symbols as a theological-cultural language system and contemporary religious cognition, especially in the context of urbanization, secularization, and the personalization of faith experiences.

The research results affirm that symbols in Catholic churches are not merely decorative but are tangible conduits guiding believers toward the invisible truths of faith, playing a significant role in forming, consolidating, and maintaining both individual spiritual life and bonds of community. Through contemplation and meditation on symbols, the faithful sense the presence of God, receiving spiritual support and being led deeper into the Christian Mystery. Notably, symbols in Hanoi's Catholic churches clearly reflect the processes of dissemination, adaptation, and inculturation of Catholicism in the Vietnamese context. The synthesis of Western-origin architecture and art with Vietnamese decorative motifs and rituals has created sacred spaces that are both

universal to the universality of the Church and rich in local identity. This progression can be compared with Catholic inculturation models in Africa, where religious symbols also centralize the reconciliation between the Christian faith and indigenous symbolic systems, highlighting similar dynamics of religious adaptation in the Global South. However, the study also identifies issues requiring further attention, such as the uneven density and sophistication of symbols across churches, the absence of certain catechetical symbols, and limitations in exploiting the depth of symbolic meaning in pastoral activities. These are important openings for future research as well as for the preservation and promotion of Catholic symbolic values in contemporary life.

In general, symbols in the Catholic churches of Hanoi are a distinct cultural-religious component, crystallizing theological values, art, and indigenous identity. They serve as vivid evidence of Catholicism's capacity to adapt and integrate across diverse cultural contexts. Studying these symbols not only clarifies the life of faith of the Vietnamese Catholic community but also contributes to the broader academic discourse on intercultural religious adaptation in the modern world

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