

A Brief History Of The Catholic Church In Thailand

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The first Catholic missionaries who came to Siam were probably the chaplains of Portuguese ships in the 16th century sent to Ayutthaya bringing the officers of Portugal to enter into relations with Siam. There are no documents to confirm this hypothesis.

There is a written history prepared by foreigners stating that in 1544, Antonio de Paiva, a Portuguese, had traveled to Ayutthaya in the time of Phra Jairaja and had been given an audience and had conversation about religion with the King. The King was converted and baptized, being given the Portuguese name of Dom João. There is no evidence to confirm this claim. The first missionary who mentioned Siam in writings about his missionary task was St. Francis Xavier himself. He mentioned Siam in his four letters written from Sancian, although his real purpose was to go to China. However, St. Francis Xavier did not go either to China or to Siam because he died on December 3, 1552.



We do not know of any resident missionary in Siam before the year 1567. Having examined documents, the first two missionaries who came to Siam were Friar Jeronimo da Cruz and Sebastião da Canto, both Dominicans. They arrived at Ayutthaya in 1567. They were given a residence befitting to them in one of the best locations in the city. Friar Jeronimo da Cruz together with two new missionaries were killed by the Burmese in 1569. Next to arrive were Franciscans from 1582 to 1767. Their missionary work in Siam is unknown to us.

The first Jesuit who came to Siam was Father Balthasar Segueira. He arrived at Ayutthaya or Odia during Holy Week of the year 1607, which means between the 16 and 26 of March 1607.

The Jesuits had their own residence, school, college and church. Their missionary work was recorded by the missionaries.

All the missionaries mentioned above were sent to Siam under the Padroado system. The setting up of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide on January 6, 1622 was certainly an event of major importance in the history of the Church and especially in the history of missions. Propaganda Fide sent three Apostolic Vicars, Ms. r. François Pallu, Msgr. Pierre Lambert de la Motte and Msgr. Ignatius Cotelendi, to carry out missionary work in China and Indochina. However, they could not avoid conflicts resulting from the Portuguese patronage in these regions.

On August 22, 1662, Msgr. Lambert de la Motte, M. Jean De Bourges, and M. Dedier arrived in Ayutthaya. They were the first missionaries of the newly established Missions Etrangères de Paris (M.E.P.). On January 27, 1664 the other Apostolic Vicar, Msgr. François Pallu, M. Lanaeu, M. Haingues, M. Brindeau and a lay assistant M. De Chameson Foissy arrived in Siam. Msgr. Lambert and Msgr. Pallu had the same opinion that Siam with its policy of religious tolerance was the most convenient base for their persecuted Missions of Cochinchina, Tonkin and China. They asked Rome for jurisdiction over Siam. It was very difficult for the missionaries of Padroado to accept the rights to superiority of these Apostolic Vicars. Conflict and controversy between the Padroado and the Apostolic Vicars were inevitable. After long consideration of the request of the Apostolic Vicars, Rome approved in 1669 by Bull *Speculatores*. On September 13, 1674, M. Laneau was nominated the Apostolic Vicar of Siam and was consecrated by Msgr. Lambert and Msgr. Pallu.

When the French missionaries arrived in Ayutthaya in 1662, they were welcomed by ten Portuguese priests and one Spanish priest whom they found serving the Christian community estimated at 2,000 souls.

With the arrival of Msgr. Pallu, two bishops, five priests and one lay assistant organized an assembly, the so called Synod of 1664 in Ayutthaya. The sessions can be summarized as follow:

1. They planned to institute an apostolic congregation composed of three orders and this congregation would be named the Congregation of *Les Amantes de la Croix de Jesus Christ (The Lovers of the Cross)*.
2. They decided to publish the instructions to the Apostolic Vicars given by Propaganda Fide. They also issued "Instructions to Missionaries".
3. They agreed to the erection of a seminary.

Undoubtedly, the growth of the Mission of Siam was evident during the long and prosperous period of King Narai the Great (1657-1688) who opened the country to foreigners and gave liberty to the missionaries to preach the Gospel. King Narai desired to base his reliance on France and to withdraw from the influence of the Dutch powers. At the same time the French influence in this part of the world strengthened the role of the missionaries and the progress of evangelization.

By 1665, Msgr. Lambert had made the program of the Synod come true when he founded the "College General" in Ayutthaya.

In 1669, the first hospital was founded by Msgr. Lambert and was supervised by Msgr. Laneau. Besides Ayutthaya, the missionaries preached the Gospel in other places such as Phitsanulok, Lopburi, Samkhok and Bangkok. In the year 1674, there were about 600 Siamese Catholics. It was in this year that the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Samsen district of Bangkok was built. The Christians of other nationalities such as Portuguese, Annamite, Japanese were more numerous. In fact, the missionaries had been working from this period until the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, but the fruit of their evangelization was indeed very small.

King Narai's attitude towards Christianity made M. Constantine Phalkon, Fr. Guy Tachard, a Jesuit priest, and even King Louis XIV misunderstand that there was hope of converting both the King and the whole country to Christianity. This led the missionary activities to disaster when the famous revolution of 1688 occurred. With an anti French attitude, Phra Phetraja, the new King, persecuted all the Christians. The situation of the Mission became better in 1691 when the King gave the seminary back to Msgr. Laneau. Another persecution occurred during the reign of King Taisra (1709-1733). The missionaries were forbidden to leave the capital. They were forbidden to use the Thai and Pali language in their teaching of religion. Moreover, the end of 1743 and the beginning of 1744 saw further persecution continuing. Besides these difficulties, Christianity was affected by the invasion of Burma and the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767.

With the advent of the present dynasty in 1782, the situation of the Mission improved gradually. The situation of the Catholic Mission at the end of the 18th century was not so favorable, since an expulsion of the missionaries took place by the order of King Taksin (1768-1782). King Rama I (1782-1809) sent for the missionaries because he wished to begin negotiations for an alliance with foreign countries and to promote trade with these countries as had been done before. In 1785, there were 413 Siamese Catholics of Portuguese origin at the Santa Cruz Church in Thonburi, 379 Cambodian Catholics at the Immaculate Conception Church in Samsen district as well as 580 Annamite Catholics. M. A. Launay described the general situation of the Mission of Siam in the beginning of the 19th century stating that in 1802 the total number of Christians in the Vicariate was estimated to be about 2,500 and in 1811 about 3,000.

It may be noted that during the time of Msgr. Garnault (1786-1811), the restoration of the Mission was begun. In 1827, the decree of Pope Leo XII gave ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Singapore to the Apostolic Vicar of Siam. Propaganda Fide confirmed this jurisdiction over Singapore to the Apostolic Vicar of Siam on May 12, 1834. In 1835, about 1,500 Annamite Christians, fleeing from persecution, settled in Samsen and asked asylum from Bangkok. This was the origin of the St. Francis Xavier Church in Samsen.

Because of the increasing number of Catholics and missionaries, Msgr. Courvez (1834-1841) asked Rome to nominate a Coadjutor Bishop and in 1838 M. Pallegoix was nominated and consecrated Bishop on July 3, 1838. By the Brief *Universi Dominici* of September 10, 1841, Rome separated the ecclesiastical region of Malaysia from the Mission of Siam, establishing

the Mission of Oriental Siam comprising the Kingdom of Siam and Laos, and the Mission of Occidental Siam which consisted of the Malayan Peninsula, the island of Sumatra and southern Burma. Msgr. Pallegoix was the Apostolic Vicar of Oriental Siam and Msgr. Courvez, the Apostolic Vicar of Occidental Siam.

A very famous and outstanding person during the 19th century in the Mission of Siam was Msgr. Pallegoix (1841-1862), whose fame spread far beyond the borders of Siam. He had a brilliant mind and deep knowledge of science, mathematics and languages. He acquired a very deep knowledge of Siamese and Pali languages. He was the author of the well known Thai Latin-French English dictionary, the first such fundamental work of the Thai language. While he was at Immaculate Conception Church, he learned Pali from Prince Mongkut who had entered the monkhood at Wat Rajathivas near his church. Prince Mongkut, in turn, took Latin lessons from him.

The annual report of 1867 of Msgr. Dupond (1865-1872) gives us the general view of the situation of the Mission as follows: the number of Christians was 8,000, baptism of Siamese 667, baptism of children 257. Since Msgr. Dupond was full of zeal and could speak Siamese as well as two Chinese dialects, he gave great exposure to the Mission among the Chinese and the Siamese. He built eight new churches for these new Christian communities and the older places were also quickly developed. When he died on December 15, 1872, he left the Mission of Siam composed of 10,000 Christians, 20 European missionaries and 8 native priests.

During the period of Msgr. Jean Louis Vey (1875-1909), a period of expansion began seriously. The masterpiece of his work was the evangelization carried out in Laos where he had initiated the spreading of the Good News by sending P. Prodhomme and P. Xavier Guégo to begin the new Mission on January 2, 1881. Finally, Pope Leo XIII erected the Apostolic Vicariate of Laos on May 4, 1899 and P. Cuaz was nominated Apostolic Vicar of Laos on May 24, 1899." Under the direction of Msgr. Vey, who had governed the Mission for 34 years, the Mission of Siam progressed greatly in various ways. In 1909, the last year of Msgr. Vey's episcopacy, the Mission of Siam included 23,600 Christians, 57 churches and chapels with 79 Christian communities, 59 seminarians, 44 missionaries, 21 native priests, 17 religious men, 123 religious women, 21 catechists, 3 colleges with 861 pupils, 62 schools with 2,692 pupils and one hospital."

The Mission had envisioned the needs of modern times and cooperated in the country reformation initiated by King Rama IV and King Rama V. A printing press had been set up quite early. In 1885, P. Colombet founded the first modern Catholic school in Bangkok Assumption College. It was placed under the care of the Brothers of St. Gabriel when they arrived in 1901 following Msgr. Vey's invitation. The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres came to Siam even before the Brothers of St. Gabriel; that is, in 1898 to take care of and direct St. Louis Hospital which Msgr. Vey had just founded and also take responsibility for formation of native religious women which had been revived at Samsen, the so called Amantes de la Croix community.

From time to time, Msgr. Vey mentioned the project of evangelization in the Northwest of Siam, close to Burma, since the central West already possessed several stations. However, the

circumstances, the necessary resources, the required personnel for this enterprise had never been at his disposal to undertake the evangelization. During the time of Msgr. Perros (1909-1947), his successor, the spread of the Catholic Mission prospered more than previously. Missionaries were sent to fulfill projects in the Northwest in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lampang, and in the North. They advanced also to Nakorn Ratchasima. As a result, it can be said that the Catholic religion had spread to all parts of Siam. During the 20th century, the Mission of Siam followed slow but uninterrupted progress of the other Missions. The Southwest part of the country became an independent Mission in 1930. This was the Apostolic Vicariate of Ratchaburi under the care of the Salesian priests. It became an Apostolic Prefecture in May 28, 1934 (AAB, Perros, annual report, 1940). Then it was erected an Apostolic Vicariate on April 3, 1941. (AAB, Document of Dioceses, Ratchaburi Diocese). Ratchaburi was finally erected a Diocese on December 18, 1965. The Chanthabun Apostolic Vicariate was established on October 18, 1944 (AAB, Documents of Dioceses, Chanthaburi Diocese) and was also erected a Diocese on December 18, 1965. The Apostolic Prefecture of Chiangmai was established in 1960 and was also erected a Diocese on December 18, 1965.

During the 20th century, many other religious congregations, both men and women, came to work in Siam, now known as "THAILAND", the land of the free people. They include among others, Ursulines of the Roman Union, Carmelites, Salesians, Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, Capuchin Sisters, Redemptorists, Camillian Fathers, Fathers of Betharram, De La Salle Brothers, Stigmatines, Jesuits, Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus, S.A.M. Fathers, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, without counting the various Thai congregations of Sisters in the dioceses.

Since the Catholic Church in Thailand had increased through zealous labor of Bishops and Missionaries, and indications had shown greater growth in the future, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide judged that the time was ripe to establish the Sacred Hierarchy in Thailand. Strong support was also given by two former Apostolic Delegates to Thailand; namely, Right Reverend Msgr. John Gordon and Right Reverend Msgr. Angelo Pedroni. Therefore, on December 18, 1965 two ecclesiastical Provinces of Bangkok and Thare Nongseng were created, giving to Thailand its first Archbishops for the country.

At that time, there was a great amount of political and social changes, especially in the capital city of Bangkok. In consequence, the Church felt an increase in its responsibilities and a need for expansion of its numerous and varied activities, especially in the fields of welfare and social development. The Church also took on the responsibility of the refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma. The Church in Thailand assisted the government in helping these refugees by establishing the organization of COERR (Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees) in 1975. These many efforts were aimed to protect the moral values of life and to face the urgent problems created by the influx of refugees from Indochina.

In 1984 on the 10th and 11th of May, His Holiness Pope John Paul the Second came for a short visit to Thailand. This gave to all the faithful a wonderful opportunity to welcome him and to see and closely feel his solicitude and his presence.

In the remote village areas, Thailand faces great poverty, lack of education and lack of public health facilities, with the consequence of an increase in the problem of a migrating work population. This goes hand in hand with a rise in prostitution. Furthermore, the rapid spread of materialistic progress and modern technology have not given much chance for the population to adapt itself properly to these new changes. Hence, the population is often unable to make reasonable choices. Everyone wants everything as soon as possible!

Conclusion: Today, in the ten dioceses of Thailand, the various responsibilities of the ten Bishops are well coordinated through the regular meetings of the Episcopal Conference. The whole population of Thailand is around 60 million inhabitants (statistic of 1994), but the Catholic population is hardly 250,000; that is only about 0.4%

Thailand has been called "The Land of Smiles"; in fact, in spite of the presence of various different religions in the country, people live in peace and harmony. And so, in a true spirit of friendship, the Catholic Church continues to collaborate in the spiritual and social development of the country.