

# Catholics in northwestern Vietnam celebrate Christmas freely

YEN BAI, Vietnam – Catholics in three northwestern provinces of Vietnam were able to celebrate Christmas freely amid signs of a growing thaw in church-government relations.

In the past, authorities from the three provinces – Dien Bien, Son La and Lai Chau – tightly controlled religious activities and prevented visiting priests from celebrating Mass, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. It said there are no resident priests or church buildings in those provinces.

Bishop Antoine Vu Huy Chuong of Hung Hoa said Dien Bien provincial authorities formally welcomed him at their headquarters and gave permission for local Catholics to attend Christmas celebrations freely. The bishop said he was able to celebrate Christmas Masses for 500 people at the homes of two lay Catholics.

Bishop Chuong said Father Joseph Nguyen Trung Thoai, who is based at the bishop's house, visited and celebrated Christmas Mass for 1,500 people at three places in Son La province. Another priest celebrated Mass for 700 Catholics.

"I am very happy that local Catholics have the freedom to celebrate Christmas this year," the bishop said.

He said he hopes construction of churches will be allowed and that priests can be sent to serve local populations.

He said the provinces of Dien Bien and Son La have around 2,000 Catholics each, while Lai Chau province has about 1,000. Many of them still dare not practice their faith publicly since they fear the government, he said.

Local Catholics moved to the area in the 1960s from the eastern provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh.

In other parts of Vietnam, the government has relaxed some restrictions on Catholic

practices. In addition, the government continues to insist on approving candidates for bishop before the pope names them officially.

At the Vatican Dec. 11, Pope Benedict XVI met with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet in what the Vatican described as an important step toward normalizing relations with the communist nation.

Triet had told an Italian newspaper earlier that his government wanted to establish diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

Local church officials hope the establishment of formal diplomatic relations will translate into more freedom for the local church.