

Pope hosts Vietnamese prime minister

VATICAN CITY - Signaling continued improvement in Vatican-Vietnamese relations, Pope Benedict XVI hosted the first ever visit of a prime minister from Vietnam's communist government.

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and a nine-member government delegation, including the head of the government Commission for Religious Affairs, arrived at the Vatican Jan. 25.

The Vatican said the meeting marked "a new and important step toward the normalization of bilateral relations," which have improved in recent years along with "greater spaces of religious freedom for the Catholic Church in Vietnam."

The pope, prime minister and religious affairs director, Ngo Yen Thi, spent more than 25 minutes speaking privately before the entire Vietnamese delegation was introduced to the pope.

The Vietnamese delegation also spent about half an hour meeting with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Vatican foreign minister.

During the meetings, a Vatican statement said, the Vatican and Vietnamese officials discussed problems remaining in church-state relations, which should be "faced and resolved through the existing channels of dialogue and should lead to a fruitful cooperation between church and state."

The Vatican and Vietnam do not have diplomatic relations, but Vatican diplomats make annual visits to Vietnam to discuss church-state relations and specific questions related to the appointment of bishops, seminary enrollment and the functioning of Catholic institutions.

The communist government of Vietnam continues to insist on approving the Vatican's candidates for bishop before their nominations are announced, and it sets

limits on the number of new seminarians allowed each year.

The Jan. 25 Vatican statement said improved relations and greater religious freedom would allow Vietnamese Catholics to “make, ever more effectively, their positive contribution for the common good of the country, the promotion of moral values – particularly among the young, the spreading of a culture of solidarity and charitable assistance on behalf of the weakest sectors of the population.”

According to Vatican statistics published in 2006, there are more than 5.7 million Catholics in Vietnam, just under 8 percent of the population.

The Vatican statement said Jan. 25 marked “the first time that a prime minister from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has met the Holy Father and the highest authorities of the Secretariat of State.”

In 2005, a government delegation led by the commissioner for religious affairs visited the Vatican to discuss ways to improve church-state relations. Members of the delegation also attended the Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI, which included the ceremony in which Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet of Hanoi received his pallium as a sign of his authority and responsibility.